



## Feminine Voice in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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**ABSTRACT:** Shashi Deshpande not only forthrightly articulates a thematic and technical maturity but also effectively communicates an intensely apprehended feminine sensibility. She has injected a new consciousness, offering varied interpretation of imperishable Indian values as well as highlighting our cultural heritage. She has added a new depth to the Indian English Fiction. Her women protagonists achieve personhood yet do not negate the family or the society. In *That Long Silence*, Deshpande defines woman as a subject in her own right. Jaya strives for and obtains a certain autonomy. She has realized her immense potentiality for action and self-actualization. Her return to home is not defeatism but the triumph of the independence of women. She learns to live in society. Knowing that her mind and vision cannot be denied to her, knowing that she thus achieves parenthood, achieved self-realization, found her voice. The present paper deals with in what way *That Long Silence* is an articulation of feminine voice. The novel presents a social world of many complex relationships. Doubt, anxiety and often a feeling of void of values push characters to intense self-examination. The women are particularly caught in the process of redefining and rediscovering their own roles, position and relationships within their given social world. The present paper is a humble attempt to dissect these points.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminism, Feminist Sensibility, Culture, Heritage, Self-actualization.

Shashi Deshpande's novels present a social world of many complex relationships. Many young men and women live together and journey across life in their different age groups, classes and gendered roles. Doubt, anxiety and often a feeling of void of values push characters in her novels to intense self-examination. The women are particularly caught in the process of redefining and

rediscovering their own roles, position and relationships within their given social world. In the extended families that Deshpande presents, two or three generations live together. She presents the modern Indian womanhood in her novels. Her own struggle as a writer to focus on women's issues, problems and experience is equally symptomatic of the resistance to feminist expression that prevails in India in the middle of the Twentieth century. She tries to distance herself from women's lives and points of view through the use of male narrative voice. As a woman writer, her dilemma was either to give voice to women's concern and be branded as a woman writer; removed from the mainstream of literary scene, or to deny her femininity and write like a man either with the male name or male narrative voice. The concerns of the women are primarily in the context of the family and the community. Deshpande has looked into woman's changing perspectives and their search for bonding within family as a mode of strength.

Simone de Beauvoir asserts, "A free and autonomous being like all creatures- (a woman) finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other" (44). In *That Long Silence*, Deshpande delineates the delicate swings of mood, the see-saw moments of joy and despair, the fragments of feelings perceived and suppressed, the life of senses as well as the heart-wringing anguish of the narrator protagonist Jaya, a housewife and a failed writer. The novel depicts the life of Jaya at the level of the silent and the unconscious. A sensitive and realistic dramatization of the married life of Jaya and her husband Mohan, it portrays an inquisitive critical appraisal to which the institution of marriage has been subjected to in recent years. It centres round the inner perception of the protagonist, a woman who is subtly drawn from inside, a woman who, as Adele King comments, "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” (97). But could she?

The question, “who am I?” (TLS, 24) haunts her so obsessively that she fails to find herself. She is an “utter stranger, a person so alien that even the faintest understanding of the motives of her actions seemed impossible” (69). Hence her agonized cries- “I can’t hope, I can’t go on” (70). In such a stifling and suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set up, she finds her female identity effaced. Her feminine dilemma is expressed in her vacillating state of mind: “I could and couldn’t do, all the things that were womanly and unwomanly [...] (83). Jaya is Suhasini and also ‘Seeta’ the pseudonym she assumes to write columns about the plight of the middle- class housewife. Both ‘Suhasini’ and ‘Seeta’ are, as Jaya says, “the many selves waiting to be discovered [...] each attached like a Siamese twin to a self of another person, neither able to exist without the other” (69). Hence, if life is “to be made possible” (193), she is to live neither as ‘Suhasini’ or ‘Jaya’, nor as ‘Seeta’ or ‘anti- Kusum’. She is to live but not in fragments.

Seething discontent within and without make her bounce upon the spring- board of life. She loses all hold on it and keeps on oscillating in opinions and choices, yet to decide who she really is. Deshpande reveals the consciousness of Jaya through an exposition of her mind in the process of thinking, feeling and reacting to the stimuli of the moment and the situation. In doing so, she goes on to assert the feminine psyche of the protagonist, all ago, to break away from the stranglehold of a quagmire social fabric rooted in patriarchy which repels as it attracts. In her tiny old flat in Dadar, Bombay, Jaya lives like an introvert, often given to brooding and reminiscing with a lot of self- reflection in order to discover her true self: “And I was Jaya. But, I had been Suhasini as well. I can see her now, the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped” (TLS, 16).

Memories plunge in often linked by the ambivalent association of ideas. Each incident, a mini story, a fiction in itself imparts an unexplored vision to the narrative. The dejections and disappointments of unrequited selfhood, the illusions and pining of love and the yearnings for companionship make up the stream of Jaya’s consciousness. Recalling the ions of her split self- entangled in her memory, she creates a world of harmony, a world of fantasy, understanding, authentic selfhood and a composite self, “Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so

that we have even snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel” (TLS, 7). She is not totally a silent and mute sufferer. She is an active participant as well as an observer in the novel. She steps out of the narrative action as a witness as it were, a critic to perceive the tenor of the story filtered through a female consciousness, “Sensual memories are the coldest. They stir up nothing in you [...]. These emotions and responses seemed to belong to other people, not to the two of us lying here together [...] whatever my feeling had been then, I had never spoken of them to him. In fact, we had never spoken of sex at all” (95).

Like Shourie Daniel’s Mira Cheriyan, the witnessing critic in Jaya is perpetually probing and protecting her autonomy. She revolts but in silence. Silence was her natural condition. When her husband Mohan talks about women being treated very cruelly by their husbands which he calls strength, she passionately bursts into rumination: “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” (TLS, 36). Like Dorothy M. Richardson, Shashi Deshpande endeavours “to render current existence as reflected in the consciousness of her heroine” (3), says Walter Allen. Veena Sheshadri asserts pertinently in this regard 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 a 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- centred women like Jaya, perennially gripping 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 (*Literature Alive*, 94).

Jaya is a modern predicament and the flood of consciousness that ensues out of it is a silent stream of thoughts and feelings.

Jaya knows pretty well that in order to get by in a relationship, one has to learn a lot of tricks and silence is one of them. She succumbs and surrenders to Mohan without revolting. She silently wills to his will. She never says ‘Yes’ when her husband asks her if he has hurt her. She endures everything, tolerates all kinds of masculine oppression silently: “[...] in the emotion that governed my behavior to him, there was still the habit of being a wife, of sustaining and supporting



him” (TLS, 48). Hence, it is Jaya who makes the “first conciliatory move” (82). A dominating husband and a suffering wife- that is her life with Mohan. She does not immediately react to the situation but the reader is insinuated through the flashback technique used by the author especially at critical junctures in the psychic life of Jaya. Lying solitary in her room, her room shuttles between the past and the present and thus covers the whole span of her life. At times, Deshpande executes the stream of consciousness technique to project the psychic reverberations of her characters in order to make the story more real and authentic. Her heroines like Jaya are rebels but only passive ones whose incarcerated lamentations are but cries in the wilderness, “mute and desperate calls to restructure the groove of society” (32), observes Madhavi K. Menon. Rebellion and suffering in Jaya has a proclivity for being transmuted into an artistic expression. In her, there is an inner need for creativity and fulfilment but this creative expression in her inhibited due to lack of privacy, of sheer physical space to reflect and work in.

Virginia Woolf attributed woman’s lack of creativity to her not having a room of her own. NayantaraSahgal recalls that until she wrote *Rich Like Us* in the USA on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, she never had a room of her own where she could write undisturbed and “where there are no interruptions” (*The Hindustan Times, Sunday Magazine*, Jan. 11, 1987). In case of Jaya, strong social and family pressure stifles her creativity and holds all creative activities in subservience to her role as a home- maker. Feminists like Helene Cixous and LuceIrrigarary identify the feminine at levels of silent and unconscious. Jaya says, “Like a disease, a disability I had to hide from everyone” (TLS, 97). Her urges are silent and mute pining passively manifested in moments of crisis and in “chaotic sequence of events and non- events” (167) that made up her life. She is silent because, “It was so much simpler to say nothing. So much less complicated” (99). The metaphor of silence for her is a retreat, a defence mechanism which helps her to express herself more comprehensively and artistically.

The first person narrative serves as an apt means to channelize the flow of her agonized reminiscences, her ruthless and crushing need to use words, to become a writer. She says, “Why am I thinking things now? Is it because I find myself struggling for words? Strange- I’ve always found writing easy. Words come to me with a facility that pleased me; sometimes shamed me too- it seemed too easy. But now, for some reason, I am reminded

of the process of childbirth. The only memory of it that remains with me is that of fear- a fear that I was losing control over my own body. And so I resisted” (TLS, 1). Jaya being renamed as Suhasini after her marriage is not a case of the loss of identity since Jaya and Suhasini are the two facets of the same coin and these two collateral names of the protagonist of Deshpande are symbolical in their socio- familial import. Jaya, her premarital name, means ‘victory’ and Suhasini, the post marital name given to her by her husband, means “a soft smiling, placid motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped” (15). Jaya is a woman who adjusts and accommodates unlike the modern women who, according to Freud, find themselves “forced into the background by the claims of culture and hence they adopt an inimical attitude towards it” (73). She is not the structurally patterned woman of the traditional Indian society where woman was chiefly confined to the hearth and man to the world, where woman was the follower and man the leader, where woman was the sufferer and man the ordainer. She does not want to be a “Sita following her husband into exile” or a “Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband” or a “Draupadi stoically sharing her husbands’ travails” (11).

Jaya believes that there is pain in hostility, and rebellion is anguish and agony. Hence, she adopts a subaltern and subservient attitude: “No, what I have to do with these mythical women? I can’t fool myself. The truth is simpler. 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?” (TLS, 11-12). In this way, Jaya attempts to demythify/demystify her actions through the animal imagery of “two bullocks yoked together” (11). But, she is never safe when yoked. So, she flounders to break out of the yoke: “Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out of the rest of the world, you are safe. That poor idiotic woman Suhasini believed in this. I know better, now I know that safety is always unattainable. You are never safe” (17). Past disappointments ‘flashback’ across her mind ‘fading out’ the consciousness of her present plight in the milieu. The memories of the past enlighten the present and the recurring images, the Sparrow story and the myths like the Ramayana lend a universal touch to her tragic predicament. The nursery rhymes and the trivial scenes though unrelated to the sequence of the narrative, yet have a thematic import. They portray the abandoned and lonely Jaya’s drift of thought and her evanescent mood



captured through the broken and fragmentary stream of consciousness: “A husband is like a sheltering tree [...]. Take your pain between your teeth, bite on it, don't let it escape [...].” (32).

Struggling with the threats to her freedom and her integrity, Jaya desperately needs to protect herself from dissipating and sinking in the crumbling world around her. Her hysterical laugh at the absurdity of marriage echoes the insane woman's laughter. It symbolizes her cousin Kusum's insanity through which she tries to define herself negatively. Hence, the self-questionings, “Who am I?” (TLS, 24). She thinks, “Am I going crazy like Kusum?” (125). Such digression in the narrative sequence as this piece of reminiscence plays a unique part since the novelist's aim is to document the flow of human consciousness in different directions unmindful of its taxing effects on the readers whose sensibilities have been nurtured on the scientific and modern ideal of reality. An individual's real self exposes itself more in his irrational, irrelevant and fragmented currents of thoughts and emotions rather than in his well thought out responses to life. Deshpande thus presents the subterranean and subliminal impressions of human life through digressions in the narrative.

In their stream of thoughts, both Jaya and Mohan look at their marital relationship where there is nothing but suppressed silence. Disgruntled with Mohan and at the consigning social milieu, Jaya wants to flee from the cribbed confines of an incarcerated domestic life in order to find a new identity for herself, a new mooring for her fugitive self. Communication at the domestic and personal level is a failure, “Nothing. Nothing between us [...] nothing between me and Mohan. We live together but there had been only emptiness between us” (TLS, 185). Jaya had never confessed her “frenetic feelings” to Mohan as it had seemed “like a disease, a disability” (97), which he had to hide from everyone. Jaya pines for social communication but the society is impervious to her spiritual need. The society as a mirror is “always treacherous” (1) for it fails to show what we want to see beyond our visual perception. There is hardly any communication between Jaya and Mohan, neither verbal nor emotional. Mohan wanted a well-educated and cultured wife, not a reciprocating and loving one. So, he resolved to marry Jaya when he saw her speaking fluently, “You know Jaya, the first day I met you at your Ramukku's house, you were talking to your brother, Dinkar, and somehow you sounded so much like that girl. I think it was at that moment that I decided that I would marry you” (90).

An intellectually idealized and cultural husband like Mohan, finds Jaya a square peg in a round hole. There develops disheartening silence between the husband and the wife. Mohan's queries remain unanswered by Jaya for she is unable to find a word of response: “I racked my brains trying to think of an answer” (TLS, 31). Jaya's inner turmoils are so tense and acute that words fail her desire for articulation. She is unable to speak her trouble out for she is a woman who faces the suffering of her life and opposition of the milieu in the true spirit of ideal Hindu womanhood where obedience and loyalty has denigrated to the state of dogged subservience. Hence her life becomes chaotic. Temperamental incompatibility between Jaya and Mohan accounts for their no communication and quizzical silence. Could a modern woman nestled in tradition like Jaya understand a traditionalist like Mohan who is rooted out and out in customs and whose repressive use of silence pressurizes Jaya into conformity with his expectations? The discord in their temperamental outlook is so great that they fail time and again to understand each other. Deshpande presents here not a woman who has a desire to revolt but the one who ultimately reconciles to her hapless lot. Having failed to discover the truth, she remains silent and reticent revealing her most personal and private thoughts in her writings. Mohan wonders as to how could women be so rebellious and esoteric, so angry and recalcitrant. To him it is unworthy 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 is no room for despair, either. There is only order and routine, today. I have to change the sheets tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms the day after, clean the fridge [...]” (147-48).

According to Simone de Beauvoir, marriage subjugates and enslaves women and it leads her to “aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose” (500). Women pay for their happiness at the cost of their freedom and in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir emphasized that such a sacrifice on the part of a woman is too high for anyone because the kind of self-contentment, serenity and security that marriage offers a woman drains her soul of its capacity for greatness, “She shuts behind her the doors of her new home, when she was a girl, the whole countryside was her homeland; the forests were hers. Now she is confined to a restricted space [...]” (502). The role of a wife restricts rather circumscribes women's self-development. According to Tong, the role of a mother does it even more and “sometimes women



play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they have to in order to survive economically and/ or psychologically. Virtually all women engage in the feminine role playing” (208). It is against this encoded and pre-ordained role of a woman that Jaya revolts. For her, “in this life itself there are so many cross-roads, so many choices” (TLS, 192) But a married woman has a few or practically no choice left to her save what her husband wills and desires. But Jaya’s is a life of instincts and urges. Unlike other married women slavishly tagged to tradition, she has her own say. She unfurls and unburdens herself to activate the creative impulses smothered within her artistic self. In *Contemporary Indian Fiction in English*, Kamini Dinesh observes, “The act of unburdening herself though self-expression becomes for her a creative process. It is not merely reliving particular moments of the past but a coming to terms with herself [...]” (88).

In reminiscing about the past, Jaya succeeds in blotting out that long silence and making future life possible. With her traditionally muted voice she wobbles between the past and the present through her stream of thoughts which reveals “ten different faces emerging from ten different mirrors” (TLS, 1). In keeping with the needs of the quality of consciousness, the flux of the stream of Jaya’s thoughts is not tied down to a rigid clock progression. Through close-ups and flashbacks, Deshpande has laid bare the psyche of Jaya which is reluctantly responsive and passively secluded. The author’s unrelieved stress on obliterating herself from the novel as a story-teller, giving full freedom to the protagonist to unveil herself using her resilient mind to document her vision of life has imparted an unquestionable credibility to the realism of the stream of Jaya’s consciousness. Through the stream of consciousness technique, Deshpande pictures Jaya’s rejection of the patriarchal notion of a unitary self or identity. Jaya observes, “But what was that ‘myself’? trying to find oneself- what a cliché that has become. As if such a thing is possible. As if there is such a thing as oneself, intact and whole, waiting to be discovered” (69).

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