



THAT LONG “SILENCE” IMPLIES ENDURANCE OR PROTEST

B. Sandhya Rani

Guest Faculty in English, Department of HSS, AU College of Engineering, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam

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Abstract:

Silence is also one of the means of communication. Messages not always conveyed through words but can also be communicated through silence. But not all silences sound the same. It could be a weapon to show protest or may be symbolic of endurance. It is revealed by understanding the other person. In our society silence is considered as a feature of womanhood and protest as unwomanly attitude but protest in silence is the trait of modern woman who struggle between modernity and tradition and get confused in identifying herself. Shashi Deshpande is a novelist who depicts the conflicts in the minds of modern woman who is victim of desolate marital relations. In her novels most of the time marital relations are characterized by silence. In her novel *That Long Silence* the protagonist Jaya Kulkarni maintains silence throughout her life. Her silence symbolizes the silence of entire womankind of our society against patriarchy which has been handed down the ages.

Key Words: Silence, Victim, Marital, Womankind, Self, Acceptance & Ideals

That Long “Silence” Implies Endurance or Protest:

Shashi Deshpande is an award winning novelist and short story writer. She is a master writer since the way she articulates human emotions and relationships, the fears and feelings experienced by women that replicate the significance of their minds. Her protagonists are educated, middle class women who become hapless victims of married life. Her women protagonists are in constant search for their ‘Selves’. They perform several roles – daughter, wife and mother, exhibit several ‘selves’ but at the end they engage themselves in recognizing their real selves. Her novels are deeply rooted in India and Indian society. Shashi Deshpande has won the Sahitya Academy Award for *That Long Silence*. In this novel she makes an attempt to explore the inner psyche of the modern woman who is at the cross lines between tradition and modernity. The novelist projects modern Indian woman’s search for self and role in the society and family because her relation with others is vital in her life.

In Deshpande’s novels most of the time marital relationships are characterized by silence. Marriage collapses due to lack of understanding between man and woman and this leads to the suffering and conflict. Her protagonists practice silence and find it an easy way out from all their troubles. Deshpande illustrates this concept through the character of Jaya who maintains silence throughout her life. Jaya’s silence symbolizes the silence of the entire womankind. Even the title of the novel refers to the silence of the protagonist Jaya Kulkarni.

That Long Silence is the story of an Indian house wife, Jaya who maintains silence throughout her life. Her silence is symbolic of alienation rooted in every woman’s mind in different forms. It is an outcome of patriarchal refusal to understand woman’s rights and desires. It is the silence that has been handed down the ages by the ideals of the mythological characters Seetha, Savithiri and Gandhari. It is the silence that typifies woman’s blind acceptance of familial, social, and cultural status and alienates her from herself. Jaya, having got in the current of the traditional role of a woman – wife and mother-- has suppressed her existential self. Though she has a happy home with her earning husband and two children Rati and Rahul and material comforts, she feels fed up with the monotony and fixed pattern of her life: “Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony” (TLS4).

Jaya before her marriage is an educated middle class girl who has an optimistic outlook on life as she was brought up by her father with his encouraging words “I named you Jaya, he said Jaya for victory” (TLS 15). But her father’s sudden death disappoints her that she holds him responsible for her diverse attitude towards life. “It’s not just that he died . . . it’s what he . . . he gave me a wrong idea of myself, of . . . my whole life changed. (TLS 154) Her mother “Ai” does not support her in any way which makes her more feeble and vulnerable. Her mother always prefers her sons that she even gifts the Dadar flat, their ancestral property to her son rather to her daughter Jaya. Her mother’s preferential treatment wounds her more and makes her resentful. These childhood disappointments as a mark of Jaya’s initial failures develop a kind of inner silence within her that deprives her to face the life boldly.

Even after marriage she has no individuality. After her marriage with Mohan, she decides to perform her role as duty bound wife confining herself to the prescribed norms of the society. Her husband Mohan worked as Junior Engineer in the new steel plant at Lohanagar. Mohan who cares for money, status and material comforts always had a clear vision of his life where there is no place for poverty, shabbiness and ugliness. He determines to marry a well-educated and cultured girl who can speak good English. Mohan who is money-centric and traditionalist marry Jaya only for his societal betterment. On their wedding day Mohan renames his wife Jaya as “Suhashini” wanting her to be always, “Soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman.” (TLS 16) Jaya

does not like this name but cannot oppose them. She does not use this name entire novel. She feels confident when she remembers the meaning of Jaya, name given by her Appa. She does not like to see herself as a poor idiotic woman. She feels that it is inhuman to impose new identity including desires and whims upon anyone. Mohan's ideas about womanhood are based on the women of his family where they are trained to perform their well defined roles ordained to them by the society. Subsequent to her first quarrel with her husband, Jaya learns that women should never be angry. For Mohan, anger makes a woman unwomanly. He even quotes his mother's silent suffering in spite of her husband's harassment as strength while Jaya considers it a misery. "My mother never raised her voice against my father however badly he behaved to her, she had said to me once" (TLS 83).

Mohan moulds Jaya's feeling as he likes. Jaya remains in silence. She cannot think about herself. She moulds pattern of her life, according to the dreams of her husband. She begins to compromise all her desires for marital harmony. She becomes aware that her word of resentment will affect Mohan's personality. This understanding freezes her in to silence as she was scared of hurting Mohan which in turn would endanger her marriage. She moulds herself completely to the needs of Mohan by stifling her needs and desires. When there was more compromise than true love it affects the continuity of the marital relationship. Jaya compromises all her desires in silence as she understands in Mohan's perception a successful life can be measured only in terms of earnings, wearing expensive clothes and talking good English and sending children to good schools whereas, Jaya longs for a happy life as depicted in commercial advertisements. Their inability to express their real feelings keeps them both detached. Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted. Her role as a wife and mother meticulously doing all household works fails to provide her with any intellectual and emotional fulfillment as she admits, "Mohan's wife, Rahul and Rati's mother. Not myself." (TLS 69) Jaya who is a creative writer as well as a house wife suppresses her creative ability and feelings for seventeen years. She thinks it is more important to be an ideal wife than a writer. Perhaps she would have been in a prolonged sleep and in the shadow of her husband if there wasn't a sudden jolt for her family. Her husband accused for being corrupt and unethical and an enquiry is instituted against him. Mohan is quite assured that his wife will help him out in all the circumstances, no matter whether he is right or wrong like, "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 didn't want to know anything." (TLS 61) She is always warned to be a passive woman and demanded to prepare herself for a husband and children. Her husband, her family, and the society she lives in compel her to be a passive, silent object and to sacrifice her interests and likes. Mohan plans to move to Dadar flat for a temporary stay wherein, he takes Jaya's approval for granted. Jaya too moves with him silently in order to avoid any kind of argument between them. She recollects, I remember now he had assumed that I accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I." (TLS11) Mohan justifies his actions stating that he did everything only for the comforts of Jaya and children.

They shifted to their Dadar flat temporarily. Her normal routine disturbed as they come into a new place and children are also on vacation with their family friends. During this time Jaya recollects her past experiences which she witnessed during her married life. After seventeen years of playing out her many faceted roles of a loyal wife and tireless mother the silence becomes deafening. She feels herself a stereo typed house wife who is "nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support" (TLS76). The haunting memories of her bitter experiences with her husband bring disappointment in her life. Her attitude changes pessimistic that she always expects a disaster in their happy married life. Though she seems to live a satisfied life, in reality she has suppressed many aspects of her personality that were not fit for her role as an ideal wife and mother. Jaya is a woman who caught between tradition and modernity. Though she exposed to liberal western ideas but she finds Indian culture and tradition as the part of her life. She has been trained since the beginning to be an ideal wife who never questions her husband. Her Aunt Vanita Mami tells her before her wedding, "remember Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree. Keep the tree alive and flourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies. If your husband has a mistress or two ignore it".(TLS32) This is the tendency of old women in our society who think that a husband is an epitome of God, whose will and interest should always be taken care of without opposition. Jaya has designed her life according to her family members' desires. She marries Mohan not out of choice but out of convenience. He is from the same caste, decent good looking and has a good job. Jaya is a typical Indian woman who suppresses her wishes and anger at every stage of life. The novel is about Indian woman's social and psychological paralysis symbolized by her silence. It is the silence of a person alienated from herself. In Shashi Deshpande's novels women's silence is a result of failure of communication between individual men and women. It is the silence that envelops Jaya and Mohan's life in Dadar flat. It creates a gap between them. This unfriendly atmosphere in her seventeen years of married life drives her towards extra-marital relationship with Kamat, her neighbor in Dadar flat who is a widower.

As Jaya has creative ability of writing, she starts writing again. She is an intense thinker who likes to write real life experiences. She writes few books and gets a prize for one of her novels but the problem is that the story hurts Mohan's sentiments. The story is about a couple, a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body. Mohan thinks that the story tells about their personal life and he is very scared about that the people of his acquaintance may assume he is the kind of person portrayed in the story. His apprehension is

enough to threaten Jaya's career as a writer. Though she knows there is no truth in what her husband thinks, she does not argue with him. She does not protest but retreats in to silence as she thought that, "It was so much simpler to say nothing, so much less complicated." (TLS 99) On his advice she starts writing light humorous pieces about the travails of a middle class house wife. Though she does not like that kind of writing however she keeps writing to make her husband happy. This shows the pathetic condition of a married woman who is devoid of choices. She has no right to express her real self even in fiction. Eventually in course of time Jaya becomes dwarfed and begins to lose her true identity. In her attempt to rediscover her true self, she finds herself as an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer. Her stories are rejected by one publisher after another. She tries to analyze the reason behind the rejection. Jaya is forced to write articles on the subjects that she hardly takes any interest in. Jaya forces herself to write what she does not want to. She states:

Seeta had been the means through which I had shut the door firmly on all these women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention, women I had known I could not write about, because they might, it was just possible resembles Mohan's mother or Aunt or my mother or aunt.(149)

As a result her writings lack the original or individual touch. She knows about her mistakes but she is helpless. At every step Jaya has to prove to be an ideal wife and mother but Jaya is a human being; a human being who always looks for love respect and freedom. At this point her neighbor Kamat comes to her rescue and makes her realize that her writings lack the intensity of thought and expression. Kamat turns to be a reliable companion for Jaya. He criticizes Jaya's writing in an encouraging way that cheers her. Jaya gets attention from Kamat and she feels totally at ease in his company because he treats her as an equal. He gives constructive criticism for Jaya's writings. In him Jaya finds a companion the most important aspect that she misses in her husband. She is in surprise that she can be so much of herself in any man's company. She says,

It had been a revelation to me that two people, a man and woman could talk this way, with this man I had not been a woman, I had just been myself Jaya. There had been an ease in our relationship I had never known in any other. There had been nothing I could not say to him and he too . . ." (153)

Jaya feels to be individualistic only in the presence of Kamat and gets attracted towards him. Gradually their relationship develops into physical attraction but their relation cannot be categorized since Kamat behaves not only like a lover but sometimes nurtures like a father and criticizes like a friend too. But unfortunately, Kamat dies unexpectedly. She finds him lying dead on the floor in his flat. As a friend she was supposed to be there and show her condolence but she runs away from the spot since she does not want to involve herself in any relationship that may spoil her married life. At this point Jaya behaves like a typical Indian wife who gives to marriage at most importance. Though she feels awful guilt yet she remains passive. If she could not meet Kamat she would not have known what kind of person she is and what kind of attachment and compatibility she can have with a man who is more understanding towards woman's emotions. Yet she cannot cross the lines since she is a married woman. In India marriage is an obligation of culture than happiness for individual. As Jaya asserts, "marriages never end. They cannot, they are state of being". (TLS127) That means she is not obeyed her marital status with her will and wish but she is imposed to accept the fact by the society. Many examples we can see throughout the novel where Jaya accepts the facts not with her consent but to accept since she is woman and wife and as the result she suffers from isolation and alienation. Despite her marriage to Mohan and subsequently becoming a mother of two children, she was lonely. Her life partner could not understand her emotions as a result of which she was torn from within. Shashi Deshpande describes her married life by using an appropriate image: A pair of bullocks yoked together . . . a clever phrase, but can it substitute for the reality? A man and a woman married for seventeen years, a couple with two children. A family somewhat like caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising visuals so I loved. But the reality was only this. We were two persons, a man and a woman (TLS8).

For all these seventeen years she has been only a wife of Mohan or mother of Rahul and Rati. She completely denied herself. But now she has to take out herself from that darkness. She decides to speak, and to listen to erase the silence that has been between her and Mohan. She decides to erase the silence, which symbolizes the assertion of her feminine voice, a voice – that articulates her thought, hope and promise. She realizes, "I will have to speak, to listen, I will to erase the silence between us" (TLS192). She re-evaluates her life. She realizes it is she who is responsible for her failure. The novelist seems to give a message that women should take their own responsibility without blaming others. Women to a great extent are responsible for their suffering. Jaya realizes that she has to go ahead over coming all the hurdles. She now thinks of leading an organized life with her husband expecting a change in his attitude. She hopes to develop better understanding with him as a companion. She decides to reject the traditional silence of a wife. She asserts:

I am not afraid anymore. The panic has gone. I am Mohan's wife I had thought and cutoff the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible. (TLS191)

She never denies her husband and children. Now she has a realization of herself and rejects the image of two bullocks yoked together that signifies a loveless couple. She comes to know that life cannot be lived in isolation. We need family and relationships to be complete. Now she looks herself and Mohan as two

individuals with different mind sets. Jaya represents those Indian women who want to break the barrier of the long silence created around them by the male authority. Deshpande through her protagonist tries to question the established traditional norms and assertively points out the women's need for self expression. The novel at the end turns down the traditional concept that the sole purpose of a wife's life is to please her husband. It reveals a woman's capacity to assert her own rights and individuality and become fully aware of the potential of a human being.

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