

Introspective rediscovery of self in Shahi Deshpande's that long silence

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Abstract

This article studies that long silence by Shahi Deshpande as a novel of self-exploration predominantly by Jaya the female protagonist and other women associated to her within familial environment and traditional society. It aims at depicting how women struggle for existence when caught between the demands of tradition and modernity. Introspection in Jaya's life takes place within her personal space and amid this silence she becomes aware of the differences between her true self and the imposed traditional roles as wife, mother and writer. The paper unravels how this juncture of self-realization empowers her to challenge stereotypes and move towards attaining fulfillment in being herself.

Keywords: women, feminism, deshpande, jaya

Introduction

Shahi Deshpande is a renowned expressive writer, in the gamut of Indian writing in English, whose uniqueness lies in creating works that extend transparency of human thoughts. Often her protagonists happen to be women who voice their plight in the male dominated web and therefore she is viewed as a feminist writer by many critics and readers. However, Deshpande refutes this notion and reiterates the fact that her novels portray people as real life examples and are not intended to be confined within a specific theory or "ism." She also states that she is a feminist who empathizes with women but does not aim at propagating it through her works, "her fiction is separate from her stance on ideological issues" [1].

Feminism is often misinterpreted as rebellion against men. On the contrary it is a human psyche that adopts unbiased approach to people irrespective of their gender which serves as a platform to oppose unjust circumstances and empower the oppressed women in which ever form it is required. Deshpande's novels primarily focus on gender issues that arise due to conflicts within familial institutions where women are caught between tradition and modernity [2]. The protagonists are upper-middle class women who are career-focused, knowledgeable and hard working. They embody the struggles experienced during their search for identity that seems to be threatened and at times at the losing end in the social system that is predominantly patriarchal and insensitive to women.

That Long Silence, a novel that won Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 is one such work that revolves around a female protagonist Jaya [3]. She represents women who introspect and experience an intense internal conflict between self-realization and the need to resist and assert their identity. Jaya who grows up as an independent person with equal rights and responsibilities is confronted by stereotypical patriarchal system after marriage.

Deshpande invests tremendous efforts in exploding the age old myths that surround women and their archetypal roles in society. As Thakur rightly points out, myths directly impact culture and beliefs of people. In Devdutt Patanaik's words myths generate beliefs, and condition thoughts, feelings, behavior and culture. Through Jaya, the author explodes the

myth of male superiority against women, especially within marital realm that "encouraged and appreciated self-abnegation and self-denial" and Deshpande "believes that by treating women as their subordinate, men are losing a good companionship" [4].

Jaya, a graduate in English, an efficient writer and a successful columnist is denied recognition and acknowledgement in her husband Mohan's family. Mohan happens to be a stereotypical person who envisions a perfect woman as one who is submissive, takes content and finds fulfillment in serving the men of her life. The novel reveals the complexities that surround a woman's life in a conventional family atmosphere where she is expected to conform to its norms at the cost of her individuality. This crisis becomes more challenging especially for women who have lived otherwise.

Jaya's life begins in a family where modern thoughts and liberty gained priority over traditional limitations especially due to her father's approach to life. She is named 'Jaya' which means 'revolt' or 'victory' in order to indicate that her life was meant to be unique and trend setting perhaps. This enables Jaya to have a positive outlook on life and relationships. Challenges begin to seep in after her father's death.

Jaya's marriage draws her towards a compromising role of a traditional wife, daughter-in-law, mother and a passive neutral writer, one that is quite contrary to her original self. However, she succumbs to the change and accepts the imposed responsibilities. She not only accepts but also remains dedicated to her new strange life for many years. Her silent acceptance starts with the change of name from Jaya to Suhasini which stands for "soft smiling, placid and motherly." Deshpande shows how marriage as an influential institution not only confines women but also destroys all that she is capable of, as in Jaya's life, where along with her name and nature her career as a writer is also consciously sacrificed and lost [5].

The novel opens at a crucial point where Jaya finds herself at crossroads. She lives through a phase of self-evaluation gauging the differences between her life before and post marriage. She also attempts to explore her real identity which seems to have been lost in the process. Jaya recalls her past experiences and examines her drastic transformation from assertion to

submission. She is startled by her own realizations and begins to see her presence in the familial set up in a new light altogether. Jaya is able to make space and time for herself only when she stays disconnected from the regularities of her married life. Deshpande subtly puts forth the tragic fact that women are caught up in their traditional roles and tend to forget the person in them just as how Jaya is engulfed by her own conformations.

Jaya is disillusioned by her husband's nature of being able to be intimate with her in spite of not containing love. She decides not to jeopardize the marital life and status, and thus takes on the duty of nurturing the relationship. She follows her aunt's advice to perceive a husband as a "sheltering tree" without which a woman's life is believed to be "unprotected and vulnerable."

Jaya dutifully waters the 'tree' even if it meant deceit and lies. Suppressed emotions, deceit and lies gradually take control of her life and thereby diminish the light of her "self" in the darkness of falsehood.

In any case, whatever my feelings had been then, I had never spoken of them to him... The only words between us had been his question,

'Did I hurt you?' and my answer, 'No' (That Long Silence 95) Deshpande elucidates a woman's plight through Jaya and various other characters like her mother-in-law, servant, cousin and a few more. Though these people belong to different social and economical backgrounds, they fall into the same pattern of life and existence that is male dominated. As Deshpande rightly observes, a woman is taught to learn a lot of tricks "to get by in a relationship" out of which "Silence is one of them." Submission is the only choice they make and this is carried out by silencing their "self."

'I had learnt it at last – no questions, no retorts. Only silence' (That Long Silence 143).

As the title indicates, "silence" plays a vital role in the life of an oppressed woman. It serves as a platform to express and communicate the contradictions that occur within. However, this internal resistance and subdued expression remains either unnoticed or misinterpreted by men. In this context silence is not portrayed as absence of thoughts, instead, it becomes a powerful tool and "loud" expression of internal resistance and the strength it involves. It is accompanied by deep introspection which provides time and space for such women to realize their self-worth by juxtaposing it with the limitations imposed on them. Through Jaya, Deshpande takes the reader to various stages of transformation and cross-roads at which women are bound to make a choice either by evading stereotypes or falling in line with them. Therefore self-realization is perceived as a "cruel process" in which the "real 'you' never emerges."

Jaya who willingly submits herself to change is unable to fit into this role with ease. Her individuality continues to combat her silence within^[6]. Jaya compares her marital relationship to the image of "two bullocks yoked together." It represents a life of monotony and duty that lacks intimacy or purpose. As Suraj and Gaur observe, the institution of marriage is viewed as 'captivity' which lacks autonomy where husband (man) is the 'absolute' and wife is the other who is bound to subordination. Jaya is distanced from Mohan as they differ in their perception of life, people and relationships. When he interprets his mother's silence as a strong will, Jaya is able to see its reality which is nothing but intense agony of suppression. Therefore,

Jaya's introspection and internal monologue enables her to comprehend life with vividness and depth.

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

Mohan's insensitive nature takes a toll on Jaya's compromising role and makes her rethink her life as a journey without destination^[7]. This realization takes root when they move into isolation from their established residence to a remote hideout to escape the embarrassment caused by Mohan's crisis at his workplace. A sudden break from monotonous routines and mere idleness carries Jaya through an introspective phase where she recognizes her failure and loss of identity as she, like a worm crawling into its hole, has disappeared into the narrow space as a traditional wife and mother. At this point of realization dawns her quest for individuality.

Since ages man has been treated as the 'absolute' and woman the 'other.' Mohan, who at a point, encourages Jaya to continue her career as a writer turns unhappy since the award winning story is about a family in which the man does not connect to his wife except through physical intimacy. In a way Mohan sees his own reflection in the male protagonist and is therefore offended.

'How can you reveal us, how can you reveal our lives to the world in this way?' (That Long Silence 144). Though Jaya does not regret the story, she decides to once again please Mohan by depicting herself as 'Seeta' with neutral and light subjects as the theme. Thus she gains recognition and wins her husband's approval by using merely her skill and burying the true writer in her.

"She (Seeta) had been the means through which I had shut the door firmly on all those other women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention; women I had known I could not write about, because they might... resemble Mohan's mother, or aunt, or my mother or aunt^[8]" (That Long Silence 149)

Jaya sulks behind the false identity of Seeta and overlooks her unhappiness and discontent in order to appear without blemish in society. Her "self" is awakened when Kamat, her neighbor recognizes the real spirit of her writing. He encourages her to disdain falsehood and strengthen her work with her sincere thoughts and zeal.

The introspective phase which occurs at three different stages helps evaluate herself as a daughter, wife and mother and a writer and to her bewilderment finds the real Jaya disintegrating. She also acknowledges that she has been expressing her discontent and disapproval only through silence. Thus, Deshpande escalates Jaya from ignorance to elegance where she comprehends her strengths and weaknesses, decides "to plug that hole in the heart." She watches her own transition from being an assertive Jaya to a subordinate Suhasini and Seeta which is merely because she did not want to become 'unwomanly'. Awareness of her caliber to fight against the willful eradication of her 'self' revives Jaya's confidence. She is not afraid anymore, the panic disappears, and fragmentation ceases.

Thus, Deshpande who begins the story of Jaya at the point of crisis takes her through an intense purification process of self realization that convicts her of her very long silence and reestablishes her individuality by subverting patriarchy^[9]. The awareness of her potential and the strength to break silence is

restored. At the end of the novel Jaya emerges as an assertive individual, and a writer who decides to “speak” through her writing, a writing that is authentic, honest, just and strong. The author concludes the story with a strong message. She emphasizes that subordination has to be questioned but not necessarily through violent rebellion. Instead, the ‘self’ has to firmly asserted within the patriarchal frame, after all ‘life has always to be made possible’ (That Long Silence 193).

Conflict of interest statement

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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