THEME OF ‘SILENCE’ IN SHASHI DESHPANDE’S NOVEL ‘THAT LONG SILENCE’

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ABSTRACT

‘Silence’ is a recurring theme in post-colonial literature. It is a form of communication. Not all silences sound same. Silence arising in the midst of a conversation can sometimes be comfortable and meaningful, whereas in other situations they remain as an obstacle between the communicators. Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent contemporary women writers in Indian writing in English. Her protagonists find themselves entrapped in the roles assigned to them by society, but they achieve self-identity and independence within the confines of their marriage. They use ‘silence’ as a weapon to show their protests and to muddle through their problems. Deshpande has won the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for her fifth novel, That Long Silence (TLS) in 1989 and was awarded Padma Shri in 2009. Silence is a ubiquitous theme in her novel, That Long Silence. This paper explores the realities behind the silence of the protagonist Jaya, who attempts to resolve her problems by a process of temporary withdrawal and achieves it only after breaking her long silence.

Key Words: Silence, husband-wife relationship, marital disharmony, temporary withdrawal

Jaya’s silence is symbolic of most of the women of the world who are unable to express themselves as individuals. Jaya before her marriage 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 . . . he was . . .’ (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.

Most of the marital relationships in Deshpande’s fiction are characterized by silence. Her protagonist practice silence to find easy way out from all their troubles. Jaya in That Long Silence symbolizes the silence of the entire womankind. Jaya after her marriage with Mohan, decides to perform her role as ‘duty bound wife’ confining herself to the prescribed norms of the society. At the time of their marriage, Mohan worked as Junior Engineer in the new steel plant at Lohanagar. Mohan 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)

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,’ he had said to me once.” (TLS 83) In the aftermath of the quarrel Jaya could not bear the silence of her husband and so to avoid such circumstances, she begins to compromise all her desires for marital harmony. She becomes aware that her words of resentment affected 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 always reserved in mind the advice given by Vanithamami that, “a husband is like a sheltering tree” (TLS 32) and Ramukakka’s words, “Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you” (TLS 138) She moulds herself completely to the needs of Mohan by stifling her needs and desires. When there was more compromise than true love it affected the continuity of the marital relationship between Jaya and Mohan. Jaya compromises all her desires in silence as she understands that, “I knew his mood was best met with silence.” (TLS 78)

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. This unfriendly atmosphere in her seventeen years of married life drives her towards extra-marital relationship with Kamat, her neighbour in Dadar flat. Kamat turns to be a reliable companion for Jaya and his “gift of casual, physical contact” amazed Jaya and for her. He criticizes Jaya’s writing in an encouraging way that cheers her. Jaya feels to be individualistic only in the presence of Kamat as she says, “With this man I had not been a woman. I had been just 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 . . .” (TLS 153) But unfortunately, Kamat dies unexpectedly. Knowing his death Jaya leaves him deliberately in silence as she is scared to acknowledge her furtive relationship with Kamat for the fear of devastating her marital life. However, she carried this guilt throughout her life.

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’s and Rati’s mother. Not myself.’ (TLS 69) When one of her novels won the prize her husband was not happy. He finds fault with the theme of Jaya’s story and related it to their life and admonishes her not
to write on such themes thereafter. 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) 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 attitude changes pessimistic that she always expects a disaster in their happy married life. When Mohan confesses of being accused of corrupt practice in his office, Jaya feels that the disaster has come to her as a gift, neatly packed with colourful ribbons. When 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 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) Mohan justifies his action stating that he did everything only for the comforts of Jaya and children. Jaya gets annoyed as she could not accept her husband’s fake reasons. Her frustrations and disappointments in her marital life begin to haunt her. Jaya’s stay at Dadar flat helps her to reexamine her relationship with Mohan.

In their stay at Dadar flat, their silence intensifies. She even longs to be alone as Mohan’s constant presence seems to be a burden for her. Consequently, Jaya and Mohan fails ignominiously to understand each other. Mohan hangs around like a trapped, confined animal as they stop conversing except for their daily needs. Silence stumbles up that squanders their physical intimacy too. “The fact of what he had done, of what lay before us, came between us, an awkward, silent third, making comfortable conversation impossible. That night, as we lay on the extreme edges of our bed, I knew he was awake too, but there was nothing I could say to him and so I lay in silence.” (TLS 55) The silence between them seems to be heavy with discomfort. At a point of time it engulfs them that they stop their conversation as a customary husband and wife. S. P. Swain opines, “Temperamental incompatibility between Jaya and Mohan accounts for their in communication and quizzical silence.” (70) Their strained relationship creates an empty space in their married life.

Jaya could never find an outlet to disclose with anyone and solve her problems, not even with her mother. There was a silence of estrangement between Jaya and her mother after her father’s death. In her helpless condition she condemns her mother as, “It was all her fault, I had thought; she had prepared me for none of the duties of a woman’s life.” (TLS 83) Even at time of catastrophe, longing for motherly support she never approaches her mother for mental support. Despite the fact that the imprudent woman Suhashini believes in the role of staying back home and looking after children to be safer, Jaya comes to understanding that, safety is never unattainable. Mohan unbearable to extend this conflict of silence attacks Jaya with volley of questions that Jaya could not answer. He finally accuses her of not being supportive to him at times of difficulties. ‘You’ve never been here. Servants, neighbours – you’ve grabbed at anyone, at any excuse to avoid me.’ (TLS 116) Mohan’s charge against Jaya seems as if, they both have been weaving the threads of guilt, anger and resentment between them all these days. When Jaya feels foolishly inadequate to answer for Mohan’s query, she blames Mohan for ending her writing career. Mohan arms himself with genuine hostility that he does not agree nor listen to Jaya’s utterances. She even feels to add that, ‘I’ve sacrificed my life for you and the children.’ (TLS 120) and to cry out, ‘Cheating, cheating’ (TLS 121) Out of despair, Jaya bursts into laughter helplessly. Mohan was shocked at her behaviour. There was utter silence after which she realizes, ‘He’s gone’ (TLS 123) Her loud laughter symbolize her frustrations and disappointments in her life as a whole. When she comes out of her despair state, she understands that Mohan has walked out without any response. Though she feels guilty of her action, she does not take steps to stop him.

Mohan’s departure gives her ample space to self-interrogate her inner self. In her introspection she decides to put an end to the guerrilla warfare which she has waged with her husband for long years. She comes
to understanding that her life comprised mostly of compromises rather than true affection. She finally comprehends that she too was responsible for her failure in understanding her husband and her children. She also admits that Mohan was not the sole reason for the end of her writing career. In her confession to Mukta, she accepts her failure and feels herself inferior without Mohan in her life. She says, ‘I’ll tell you what’s wrong. I’ve failed him. He expected something from me, from his wife, and I’ve failed him. All these years I thought I was Mohan’s wife; now he tells me I was never that, not really. What am I going to do? What shall I do if he doesn’t come back? Mukta, I was so confident, so sure of myself, I felt so superior to others . . . Kusum, yes, and you too . . . and now, without Mohan, I’m . . . I don’t know what I am.’ (TLS 185) By way of writing she achieves articulation of her torments and thereby starts to break her silence as she says, “I will have to erase the silence between us” (TLS 192) She understands that silence can never make their married life meaningful.

**Conclusion:**

Jaya who initially performs her role as stereotyped house wife, depending entirely on her husband like a crawling worm in to the hole for safety, finally understands and accepts that she too has contributed to her own oppression. As Vinay Kumar Pandey states, “She realizes that she was being defeated: her voice was being hushed up by the male-dominated society. Towards the end of the novel Jaya emerges as a bold and mature woman who refuses to be merely a shadow that has been at the roof of all troubles in her life.” (60) Her earlier belief of two bullocks yoked together moving in same direction and same speed is to avoid pain and discomfort. After a long struggle in her search for true identity she decides to break ‘that long silence’ that she has maintained in her seventeen years of married life with Mohan. Jaya states, “If I have to plug that ‘hole in the heart’, I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us.” (TLS 192) She sums up with a positive note that, “I’m not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I’m Mohan’s wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan’s wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible. The child, hands in pockets, has been with me through the years. She is with me still.” (TLS 191)

Throughout the novel ‘silence’ reveals different kinds of feelings like protest, objection, fear, pain, suffering and endurance despite of diverse social status of women characters. However, silence is not confined to the expression of pain only as Shakespeare remarks: ‘Silence is the perfect herald of joy.’(Much Ado About Nothing) Silence as an ever-present theme in the novels of Shashi Deshpande eloquently makes its presence felt throughout her novels. Breaking of silence by her protagonists makes their voice heard. As Deshpande in her article on “How to Read – or Rather, How Not to Read the Writing of Women” rightly puts in, “Jaya decides to continue with her marriage, it is not because she is accepting the traditional role of a wife; on the contrary, she has rejected all the traditional ideas of roles in the course of her thinking. As she says, she has begun to see the world differently. And therefore, she goes back into the marriage a changed person, knowing her life can never be the same again.” (14) Thus, Shashi Deshpande in portraying Jaya’s silence, suggests women to break their silence of protest to identify their true self.

**References:**