

**RUPUTURING THE SILENCE: TRACING THE GROWTH OF JAYA IN
DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE***

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ABSTRACT: *Silence anticipates the storm and Jaya's 'long silence' in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1989) makes the approaching storm all the more audible. Shashi Deshpande in *Creative Theory: Writers on Writing* says: "[...] and then I wrote *That Long Silence* almost entirely a woman's novel nevertheless, a book about the silencing of one-half of humanity" (210). The novel traces the growth of Jaya, an educated Indian wife as an individual. The novel opens with Jaya pondering over her life; life that has confined her to the prescribed roles of wife and mother and made great demands on her to live up to the model of *pativrata*, ideal womanhood. Jaya does everything her husband wishes. She initially has no choice but to be nice to him, however much she has a mind of her own. But when Mohan reveals his involvement in a financial malpractice and takes her to the old Daddar flat in order to hide from the enquiring authorities, Jaya begins to question the prison of the home she had been put into since her marriage. She tries to erase a woman's long silence: "To achieve anything, to become anything, you've got to be hard and ruthless" (1). Throughout her life she has helped her husband in building his identity but now she engages in searching who she really is and what is her individual identity.*

KEY WORDS: *That Long Silence, feminism, freedom*

INTRODUCTION

In India even today when a child is born, the family first enquires about the gender and if it is a girl, preparations begin. However, the preparations are not for a bright future but to make her a perfect 'woman' by internalizing in her the notion that she is a weaker sex and has no identity separate from her father or husband. The better the understanding of this 'truth', the more are the

chances to get married in a good family. Since childhood, girls are taught to be docile and submissive so that they can naturally learn to suppress their desires and Jaya is also trained for it, right from her parent's home. This makes Jaya always deny the fulfillment of her individuality. She gives up her writing, her only possession, her only way of freedom as she was her own self in them. Jaya remembers winning a prize for one of her story, story about a couple, in which the husband could never understand his wife and reached her only through her body. Mohan had got enraged by her story. He felt as if the world has known about his theft and he was not wrong as Jaya eventually says, "[...] that I was alone. [...] We had never come together, only our bodies had done that" (98) however, at that time looking at his face, Jaya felt that she had offended him. She stopped writing after that and genuinely tried to find joy in the duty of a wife and mother: "We smiled, we laughed; I, the mother, served them with 'love and care'; Mohan, the head of the family [...]" (4). But self deception is a temporary refuge, so even after many years of routine and dedication, when Mohan holds her responsible for the crisis in their life and takes her for granted; she starts wrenching herself free from the traditional code of conduct and evaluates her own truth. In playing out the role of a good "house proud woman" (14), she suppresses her self. She dresses and behaves the way her husband likes. Her father named her Jaya, "[...] Jaya for victory" (15) but she accepts the defeat without protesting when her name is changed from Jaya to Suhasini. Now Jaya is back: "[...] I had often found family life unendurable" (4). She is not the one who made the first reconciliatory move after their first fight. "I had learnt to control my anger after that, to hold it on a leash" (83), Mohan's adamant silence made Jaya lapse into a seventeen years long silence.

STUDY

For seventeen long years of her marriage, Jaya constantly betrays her emotions of anger and frustration but under the present circumstances, her repressed anger against the person responsible for the meaninglessness of her life starts erupting: "I should have thrown his own words back at him, paid him back for years of submission- the trodden worm turning" (6). Time has come to become 'unwomanly': "I realized that anger made a woman 'unwomanly'" (83), she is getting rid of the all the conditioning Mohan has given to her.

Jaya always knew that her relationship with Mohan was a delicately balanced one, "[...] so much so that we have even snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel" (7). She describes her married life as "a pair of bullocks yoked together" (7). They do not share understanding but just the burden of duties. Mohan makes her feel that he has no realization of her psychological and emotional feelings. For Jaya love is more important than mere physical union. She used to believe that love comes before sex but after living with Mohan she realizes that it could be other way round. Time when rational thinking simply stops, Mohan's repetitive Question "Did I hurt you?" (95) and his wordless silence makes the consummation of their love mechanical; and yet Jaya confesses that "[...] it is more comfortable for them to move in the

same direction. To go in different direction would be painful; and what animal would voluntary choose pain” (12). Probably, this fear of pain is one of the reasons that have kept Jaya dull and drab up till now. She meditates as to why women are more committed to their family than anything else in this world and says:

I have feeling that even if little boys can forget this story, little girls never will. They will store this story in their subconscious, their unconscious or whatever, and eventually they will become that damnably, insufferably piggish sparrow looking after their homes, their babies...and to hell with the rest of the world. Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out of the rest of the world, and you're safe. The poor idiotic woman Suhasini believed in this. I know better now. I know safety is always unattainable. You're never safe. (82)

In the Indian society women are as unsafe at home as they are in the outside world. The only difference is that the fear at home is not of the assault on the body but on the mind. The commitment of 'just' looking after family needs acts as a biggest constraint for women and Jaya struggles to break away from the confinement of the domestic world. She is ready to shed the garb of the 'piggish sparrow' and then her drift of thoughts reminds her of Kusum, her mad cousin who gave birth to three daughters and no son. She was rejected by her husband. Kusum made Jaya glimpse a true image of herself, one that got blurred while 'scrubbing and cleaning the toilet'. This was the image of her free self. When Kusum was breathing Jaya considered herself to be sane. She was happy that "I was not-Kusum. Now, with Kusum dead...?" (24), Jaya wants to be her, she wants to seek her own space. Kusum's suicide is not an escape but a protest, a violent one that a woman can register against patriarchy. She defeats her victimizers by denying being a victim. She wins by transcending the reaches of patriarchy by her madness and death.

Kamat once warns Jaya: "[...] beware of this "women are the victims" theory of yours. It will drag you into a soft, squishy bog of self-pity. Take yourself seriously, woman. Don't skulk behind a false name. And work- work if you want others to take you seriously. This scribbling now and then..." (148). So, Jaya with Mohan's consent begins to write humorous pieces about middle-class housewives in a weekly column entitled "Seeta". Jaya exclaims that Seeta "had been the means through which I had shut the door, firmly, on all those other women who had invaded my beings, screaming for attention; women I had known I could not write about, because they might- it was just possible- resemble Mohan's mother, or aunt, or my mother or aunt" (149). Jaya wants to shut them because they all like her are in a choking state of subjugation. Fear stares at Jaya through their eyes and stands face to face with the fear in her own. Their pain instigates her to revolt and rebellion she knows will again hurt Mohan.

Marriage has pushed Jaya into a dark despair. Throughout her life she has felt the burden of Mohan's wanting, his clinging and she herself has waited: "Yes, ever since I got married, I had

done nothing but wait. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for the children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch-carrier man..." (30). She could not raise her voice and feel her long repressed emotions until the day there is "[...] nothing to be cleaned, nothing to be arranged or rearranged, put back in its place, tidied" (25). Jaya feels free, "[...] after years, of all those monsters that had ruled my life, gadgets that had to be kept in order, the glassware that had to sparkle, the furniture and curios that had to be kept spotless and dust-free, and those clothes, god, all those never ending piles of clothes that had to be washed and iron, so that they can be worn and washed and ignored once again" (25). She experiences a 'curious sense of freedom' and reconsiders her relationship with Mohan, Rahul, and Rati and also analyzes her life.

Jaya can now sense that Mohan has reduced her to the level of an object. She was never a partner in marriage; instead through her he flaunts his status and money. When she was misunderstood by the doctor because of her 'crippled, soiled, home wear sari', Mohan's ego was hurt and the sense of shame did not let him realize the gravity and the urgency of the situation. Jaya had started bleeding suddenly during her second pregnancy. Does the lending of a sperm free a 'man' from all the other responsibilities of gestation period? Is it only the duty of a 'mother' to protect the child from the period of conceiving to the time of delivery and then fulfill the caring and cultural role: "How often I'd done this [...] looking in on Rahul and Rati to see that they were sleep, making sure that the doors had been bolted" (181). Like a responsible and loving mother, Jaya has always been there for her children. She still is, even though they are independent now. However, at present the time in Daddar flat has made her realize that in playing the role of an ideal mother, she has restricted her self-development: "As I burrowed through the facts, what I found was the woman who had one lived here. Mohan's wife. Rahul's and Rati's mother. Not myself" (69). The last three full stops stand for the end these roles have put on her individuality. Going through 'The Diaries of a Sane Housewife', she further says: "And yet, as I looked through them, the picture of a life spent on such trivialities scared me. Reading through the entries, I could feel her dwindling, the woman who had lived this life" (70). Nevertheless the process of understanding that no bond should snatch your individuality has started. Her mind is wandering, is peeping through curtains, spying from behind the doors, scuttling on the floor, trying to invade the net that has trapped her femininity and human desires. She had fallen into the trap of traditional Indian womanhood on the first day itself she went to Mahan's place. She "[...] discovered how sharply defined a woman's role was [...]" (83) in his house. At that time she even blamed her mother for not educating her about the duties of a wife. Anyhow she soon decided to 'pattern herself' after the women of Mohan's family:

That way lay- well, if not happiness, at least the consciousness of doing right, freedom from guilt.

And so, when something was not done well, or on time, a button missing, or a meal cooked badly, or to delayed, I had cringed in guilt. And when I had been praised for

anything, I'd been so ridiculously pleased, "I almost wag my tail, like a dog that's been petted by its master,' [...]" (84)

Her love and devotion towards Mohan makes her accept whatever he does and wants:

[...] I had cut my hair, 'up to here, like Mehra's wife' (and Gupta's wife, and Yadav's wife, and Raman's wife). And Ai had cried out and said, 'Have you gone mad? All your Lovely hair!'

'Mohan wanted me to cut it.'

'Mohan!'. (96)

Jaya has not been acting; she has always been acted upon until she is awakened to her personhood by Mohan's outburst: "He accused me of not caring about the children, of isolating myself from him and his concerns [...]" (120). She wants to cry out: "Cheating, cheating [...]" (121). At last comes the awakening and she kills Suhasini: "Suhasini was dead, yes, that was it, she was the one Mohan was mourning, she'd walked into the sea at last. No, the fact was that I'd finally done it- I'd killed her" (121). Jaya has awakened to the deeper realities of life and killing Suhasini is a kind of celebration of her womanhood. Her soul evolves and helps her to consolidate a newly awakened self, the self which is more important to her than anything else in the world. She exercises her freedom of choice and opts for personal liberty: "*I must not laugh, I must not laugh...* even in the midst of my rising hysteria, a warning bell sounded loud and clear. I had to control myself, I had to croak in this laughter. But it was too late. I could not hold it in any longer. Laughter burst out of me, spilled over, and Mohan stared at me in horror as rocked helplessly" (122). The mother, the wife has completely lost control over Jaya and allows 'the devil' to take possession. This is Imtiaz Dharker's devil, the devil of "The devil's day", "[...] hungry for his grace" (69). This devil has silently waited for years so that people can understand his perspective and feelings but now as silence is misunderstood and taken for granted, he is up with his havoc. In India women have been stereotyped as goddesses and thus their privileges of being human are confiscated. But at this moment, Jaya is even ready to be called a devil; to enjoy her freedom 'to be'.

Kamat also helps in precipitating this change in Jaya. "All this anger...' Kamat had grinned at me" (147), recalls Jaya. Kamat is the first one who holds up a mirror to Jaya's real self that has crumpled. He helps Jaya to recognize that she is not satisfied with the life she is living. She is leading it just because she is scared of a change: "[...] he had twisted his magnificent voice into a feminine falsetto, doing a much better job of mimicking than I had done, "[...] "if only I had the time. But I'm a wife and mother first, my home and Children come first to me... blah blah blah." Pah! The fact is that you're scared" (148) and Jaya confesses it: "Yes, I have been scared, scared of breaking through that veneer of a happy family..." (191). Kamat not only makes her desire change: "[...] now how often I had sighed for a catastrophe, a disaster, no, not a personal one, but anything to shake us out of our dull grooves" (4) but also helps her see what

lies inside her: “Spew out your anger in your writing, woman, spew it out. Why are you holding it in?” (147).

Mohan had left the flat after the unexpected behaviour of Jaya. She waits for him to return but this waiting is different, “I stood staring at the room flooded now with light, my hand still on the switch. What did I need light for? I switched it off [...]” (124). The room is flooded with the light of self discovery. She does not need the electrical light anymore as new confidence has already sparkled her life. She found herself “[...] engulfed by the ghost of Kusum, welcoming me to the category of unwanted wives, deserted wives, claiming me joyfully at last as a companion. I could not escape her any more: there was nowhere I could go, nowhere else she could go either. Here we were together at last- Jaya and Kusum” (125). Kusum in her madness “[...] had been able to get away from the burden of pleasing others [...]” (126). Jaya also experiences the same sense of autonomy.

“I needed to be alone now” (187), the solitude which she subjects herself to when Mohan leaves is not a sign of self abnegating withdrawal from life but of independence and strength:

And now I found myself looking at the picture of a girl, a child, wearing a dress with pockets for the first time, thrusting her hands in them, feeling heady with the excitement of finding unexpected resources within herself.

That child was me. (187)

This free and bold child is clearly visible in the symbolic act of Jaya’s running out of her home in the rain. It is the moment of feminism; Jaya breaks every physical and mental shackle to assert her ‘being’:

I couldn’t stay here, no, not a moment more. I rushed out, slamming the door behind me, clattering down the stairs, even though I could hear the whine of the lift coming up.

As I got out of the building, the rain came down in the torrent. (174)

Water is linked with purification, cleansing and baptism so is a symbol of rebirth, Jaya’s rebirth. Jaya talks about rebirth, another life after death: “[...] I feel it gives you a chance to redeem the failures of this life, doesn’t it, if you have another life?” (184). But after the bath, “Hastily I released the tap and a generous flow of warm water gushed out. I poured it over myself and came out feeling light-headed and purified” (178) she feels as if she has got the chance to ‘redeem the failures’ in this life itself. She wants to start from the beginning: “*I will begin with her, with this child*” (187).

The discovery of her own strength helps her see the injustice done to other woman also. She saves a girl from molestation:

One of them, I realized now, was openly fondling the girl's small breasts. She opened her eyes and the men laughed. She laughed too- a thin, ugly laugh that went on and on. The cigarette was roughly pulled away from her lips by the man. She tried to grab it. The man moved away. She got up. Swayed, tottered and leaned against the other man. He held her and began roughly kneading at her breasts. The girl, unaware of it, still reached out for the cigarette.

I could not control myself any longer. 'Stop,' I cried out. 'Stop, what are you doing to her?' (175)

Jaya's own growing sovereignty makes her feel proud of Manda's confidence. Manda, the grand daughter of Jeeja is not like her grandmother; she goes to school, is educated and above all knows 'how to fly'.

Jaya has also 'learnt to fly' and is not afraid anymore to speak 'Sanskrit', a language which is not permitted to woman characters in drama. But she is even aware of the fact that Mohan will be back soon with his question: "[...] 'What do you say, Jaya?'" (192).

DISCUSSION

In an interview, while talking to Lakshmi Holmstrom, Shashi Deshpande observed that "[...] feminism isn't a matter of theory [...] there are much terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think that it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children, or about not being married, not having children etc. [...] for me feminism is translating what is used up in endurance into something positive" (24)²³. This is what Jaya also decides. Instead of using her 'feminine power' for endurance, she now resolves to use it to come out of the game of power in order to mutually construct a peaceful world of equality with Mohan. She has understood that living in a family does not mean to be restrained by it. She is ready with her answer, ready to give her life for her family, but now 'not her soul, not herself'.

WORK CITED

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²³ "Interview: Shashi Deshpande talks to Lakshmi Holmstrom" published in *Wasafari* edition number seventeen, titled "Spring 1993"