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Changing Paradigms of the Self and the Other in *That Long Silence*

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The paper will examine the psychological space as depicted in the novel That Long Silence by Shashi Deshpande which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990. Her novel explores the problem of discovering the 'self' in the life of an educated middle class Indian woman who desires to be accepted as an individual. Narrated by the protagonist, Jaya, a housewife who has been married for 17 years, the novel follows her journey in the search for her identity in a patriarchal society. It delves deep into the polarity of gender roles and shows how their disparity creates physical, emotional, mental and psychological anguish and trauma in the lives of the women across diverse social and economic strata through the characters of Jaya, Jeeja, Kusum and Mohan's mother. The novel also explores Jaya's silence as a coping mechanism and her journey towards literally finding her voice and achieving self-expression while realising her self-worth and identity within the marital home.

Keywords: Silence, Feminism, Identity Crisis, Isolation, Marginalization, Hope, Self

That Long Silence, the seminal novel exploring feminism by Indian novelist Shashi Deshpande, is a woman's search for her identity amid the myriad roles she plays as a daughter, wife and mother. It throws light on the silence and suffering that go hand-in-hand in the lives of women across the strata of society. The role of a woman as defined by traditional Indian society and customs confines her to the home space — she is expected to cook, clean and maintain the home. She is also expected to be submissive. Since times immemorial she has been defined as the lesser when compared to man. Simone de Beauvoir scathingly brings out the polarity of the distinction accorded to the sexes in her book, *The Second Sex*, when she says:

'And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex — absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he

with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other.' (6)

Such is also the case with Jaya, the protagonist of Deshpande's novel. Brought up in a liberated and modern environment, by an indulgent father who names her "Jaya for Victory" and celebrates her individuality, she is married off to Mohan by her mother and brothers after the death of her father. Mohan, a traditionalist, marries Jaya as he finds in her the well-educated, English-speaking partner he had been searching for. Post marriage, he changes her name to 'Suhasini', meaning "a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman." According to Sonima K K, "This new name given to her represents the stereotype of a desexualised 'angel in the house'" (3). Mohan glorifies and associates the feminine with the image of his silent docile mother, who never voiced a word of complaint against his violent father and instead bore the brunt of domestic violence in a stoic manner. He eulogizes her, "She was tough. Women in those days were tough" (36). Jaya finds only a son's insensitivity in his statement. Instead she thinks, "I'm a woman and I can understand her better, he's a man and he can't" (36-37). As their marriage progresses, Jaya too tries to mould herself into that form of docility by becoming silent. "No questions, no retorts, only silence" (143). The change in name is the first sign of loss of identity. Suhasini and Jaya are constantly in conflict, and that conflict is well articulated. Jaya wants to speak while Suhasini guards her silence. Critic Shakuntala Bharvani feels, "The woman of today, therefore speaking in the language of psychology has a near schizophrenic personality. One side steadily 'accepts' while the other craves to speak, to think, and to express the life of the mind" (249).

As a woman born in a patriarchal society, Jaya has always felt that she has been marginalized and treated as a second-class citizen. Made to listen to classical music over her preferred Md. Rafi and Lata Mangeshkar songs, she and her cousins, not the boys, cleaned the leftovers from meals. Even the ancestral house in Dadar is gifted to her brother. Completely marginalized as a woman, she has become used to being depicted more as absent than present.

At the time of her marriage to Mohan, Vanitamami, a traditionally suppressed woman, advises her, "a husband is like a sheltering tree" (32). She is surprised at Jaya, "Look at you — for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that?" (27). Sonima K K offers the view:

'The socialization of a girl child for her future roles as wife and mother begins in early childhood when the prevailing social mores and norms are studiously inculcated into her through

myths, legends, folklore and rituals. Women are made to believe these mythical constructions of womanhood as natural so as to make them yield to their inferior status in society.' (2)

In the novel, when Tara, the servant Jeeja's daughter-in-law allies against her husband Rajaram, it is Jeeja who shuts her up. 'Stop that! Don't forget, he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?' (53). The concept of gender is not merely a biological phenomenon but a social construct. Jaya says that she even "Snipped off bits" (7) of herself to become an ideal daughter, ideal wife, ideal mother, in short, an ideal Indian female.

The novel opens at a crisis point in the life of Jaya. Her husband of seventeen years, Mohan, has been accused of accepting a bribe in office and has been asked to stay away from office until the storm blows over. This necessitates a move from their upmarket Churchgate home in Mumbai to Jaya's ancestral home in Dadar. Bound together in marriage, yet two distinct individuals, Jaya likens them to, "A pair of bullocks yoked together" (7). This startling imagery starts the process of unravelling the mental conflict that is central to Jaya. The forced stay in the new environment also highlights the differences in their reactions to the crisis and finally exposes the sham of their marriage. While Jaya feels at home and settled, Mohan finds the phase of waiting hard to live with. In contrast, Jaya resumes her life as if nothing is amiss. She draws a comparison between what waiting means for a man and how different it is for a woman. For a woman, the period of waiting begins right from her childhood. In fact, the very essence of a woman's life revolves around waiting.

Mohan had "a clear idea of what he wanted, the kind of life he wanted to lead, the kind of home he would live in, and I went along with him" (25). He assumes that she would accompany him and takes her acquiescence for granted. Simone de Beauvoir says of women that, "They have gained only what men have been willing to grant, they have taken nothing, they have only received" (9). However, Jaya is a modern woman and does not want to be like "Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails..." (11).

She is disturbed when she hears sounds of a woman being lashed and beaten by her husband one night. The wife neither retaliates nor retorts and Jaya is not able to understand why the woman maintains her silence. What surprises Jaya is that, "there seemed to be no anger behind her silence" (51). Sarla Palkar suggests that these women are the "victims of patriarchy and their own silence" (163). Jaya, as well as the other female characters in the novel find themselves confined and caged within the roles thrust on them by society but

they manage to use 'silence' as a weapon in order to maintain the sense of apparent peace behind the facade of marriage. Silence is also a form of communication—it is a powerful medium that conveys emotions. Jaya's silence, as well as that of the other women who are suppressed in the novel, is an embodiment of those women in the world who are unable to express their selves in marriage. She soon realises that Mohan wants a wife who will not retort in anger and says, "I knew his mood was best met with silence" (78).

While going through her diaries Jaya finds, "the woman who had once lived here. Mohan's wife. Rahul's and Rati's mother. Not myself" (69). Her introspection is an attempt to find her identity. Seventeen years of silence and lack of understanding by her spouse drives Jaya to have an extra-marital affair with her neighbour. She is amazed at his "gift of casual, physical contact". When she is with him, Jaya feels she has got in touch with herself, "With this man I had not been a woman. I had been just myself - Jaya" (153). While Kamat encourages her writing, Mohan is distraught when her novel wins an award. He is worried that the theme of her novel can be mistaken to be the story of their lives and the one vocation which allows her to express herself—writing—is also taken away from her. She begins to feel that she is a failed writer.

In the Dadar flat Jaya longs to be by herself but Mohan's restlessness becomes a source of frustration and resentment for her. His own anxiety finds an outlet in harsh words to Jaya and he attacks her verbally, "You've never been here. Servants, neighbours - you've grabbed at anyone, at any excuse to avoid me" (116). In retaliation Jaya blames Mohan for her failure as a writer. She lashes out at him, "I've sacrificed my life for you and the children" (116). At the end of her tether and exploding with simmering resentment, she bursts out in hysterical and almost maniacal laughter. Shocked and aghast at her behaviour, Mohan walks out and Jaya makes no attempt to stop him.

With Mohan's departure comes the time and space to reflect and explore her inner self. She finally realises that she is also partly responsible for her current dilemma and returns to writing—a cathartic release—and discovers the child within her. Finally, realisation dawns and she says, "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" (192). She purges the image of the two bullocks yoked together and rejects her earlier thinking as wrong.

The literary action all takes place in Jaya's mind and encompasses a considerable length of time. Jaya recollects milestones and jumps forward and backward skimming through the trivial and

focussing on the main events in her life. She thinks of Kusum, a distant cousin who lost her sanity and clung to Jaya who in her turn looked after her. The presence of Kusum, a mad woman, brings to mind the idea forwarded by Susan Gubar and Susan Gilbert when Deshpande writes, "She was of no use to anyone after she went crazy, nobody needed her" (22). Her children also reject her and Kusum is taken away by Jaya and put up in the Dadar house, where she keeps attempting to escape and return to a family that does not want her anymore. Kusum is also depicted as Jaya's double. Time and again, Jaya revisits the ghost of Kusum to reassure herself that she is not going insane, "With Kusum's madness I became aware of my own blessed sanity" (24). Kusum is the touchstone against which Jaya measures her own sanity. Cast as an image of her own anxiety and rage, she is Jaya's other. Jaya understands that, "A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical and frustrated. There is no room for anger in my life, no room for despair either" (147-48). Her suppressed self is released in Kusum's madness. "In her madness, sycophantic, dependent, frightened, clinging Kusum had escaped. She had been able to get away from the burden of pleasing others; only in her madness had she been able to be gloriously, unashamedly herself" (126-127). During her introspection, Jaya realises that she cannot escape the ghost of Kusum, "Here we are together at last — Jaya and Kusum" (125). In a paper published in the *Journal of Literature and Aesthetics*, Shashi Deshpande throws light on Jaya's actions at the end of the novel, which is filled with hope for Jaya.

'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 roles in the cause 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)

In conclusion, the paper explores the changing paradigms of the self and the other in Jaya's silence which acts as a coping mechanism in her journey towards literally finding her voice and achieving self-expression while realising her self-worth and identity within the marital home.

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