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Silence as a Literary and Cultural Device in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract:

Silence is a rich and multifaceted literary and cultural device as used by Shashi Deshpande in *That Long Silence*. It is used to explore themes of oppression, identity, infidelity, and emotional distance, as well as moments of transformation in the relationship of husbands and wives in Indian patriarchal society. Furthermore, the novel not only offers a powerful critique of patriarchal dominated Indian society but also a call for women to find their voice and assert their identities on their own terms. This research paper attempts to show that the use of silence not only seeks to challenge traditional patriarchal social norms and expectations but also explores the emotional and psychological worlds of Indian housewives with wounded psyche.

Keywords: Silence, Dilemma, Literary Device, Psychological turmoil, Repression.

Introduction

The novel, *That Long Silence*, was published in 1989, at a time when India was undergoing significant social and economic changes, including the rise of the middle class and the growth of consumer culture. At the same time, however, traditional social structures and hierarchies continued to exert a powerful influence on Indian society, particularly in rural areas. In every sense, the novel still holds immense relevance to the present day socio-cultural context. Shashi Deshpande in an interview with Joel Kuortti says that:

That Long Silence is a hysterical novel in the sense that inside of me I was kind of screaming, but when it came out - as you said, one steps back from that screaming self - and one says, look Jaya is very analytical. There is no point at which she gives way to her emotions or self pity or anything.

Throughout she is analyzing herself, her life, her relationships, and I think that is how it has been for me. I think it was really the culmination of the anger and all the repression; everything came out in That Long Silence. (Siddhartha Sharma, p.55)

Deshpande's use of silence in the novel *That Long Silence* reflects her feminist literary concerns. As a writer, Deshpande is known for her nuanced and complex portrayal of women's lives and experiences who constantly suffers from indifference at the hands of their loved ones. Her work is often characterized by a deep sensitivity not only to the emotional but also to psychological landscapes of her characters. By using silence as a literary device, she is able to explore the inner lives of her characters which is full of bitterness and sufferings.

The use of silence in the novel can thus be seen as a way of exploring the pain and suffering of women, and of questioning the ways in which traditional social norms and expectations continue to shape the lives of women in particular. Jaya's struggles to assert her own identity and find her voice showcases the hardships of Indian women during this period, as they navigated the changing social landscape while also opposing the deeply ingrained patriarchal structures.

In Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*, silence is used as a literary and cultural device to convey the experiences and emotional turmoil of women who are constrained by societal expectations and gender roles. "Generally, a woman's identity is defined in terms of her relationship with man as a daughter, a wife and a mother. It means virtually a woman doesn't have an identity of her own", (72) says Indira Kulkshreshtha. The novel's title itself suggests a prolonged period of silence, and Jaya's silence is seen as a way of coping with the pressures and expectations placed on her by society.

At its most basic level, silence is used as a symbol of the protagonist's inner turmoil and her inability to communicate her true feelings to the people around her. Jaya, the main character, feels trapped in her role as a wife and mother, and her silence is a way of expressing her dissatisfaction with her life. Throughout the novel, she struggles to find a way to break out of this silence, to express herself. She longs to communicate her desires to her

husband and to assert her identity as an individual who seeks separate existence from her roles as wife and mother. In Anita Desai words:

Thus, most of these female characters are regenerative struggling with forces that condition their growth in a patriarchal, male dominated Indian society. They come into conflict with society as their individualism asserts itself heavily. They undergo the "terror of facing single handed the ferocious assaults of existence. (Anita Desai, P.167)

However, silence in "That Long Silence" is not just a personal or psychological issue, but is deeply embedded in the cultural norms and expectations of women in Indian society. Jaya's mother-in-law, for example, is a proponent of the idea that a woman's place is in the home, and that she should always be silent and obedient to her husband. The novel aptly shows the various ways in which these cultural norms can be oppressive and suffocative for women. This attitude is reflected in the way that Jaya's husband, Mohan, expects her to behave with him. Right from her childhood days, she has been told stories about Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, depicting the sharing of their husbands' travails and their unspoken sufferings. Jaya refuses to be any of these role models because she is of the opinion that they have lost all relevance in Modern period. Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, all these legendary women followed their husbands willingly, but Jaya followed her husband 'Mohan' because of compulsion. "there is a frank brutal realization of this evil necessity in her conjugal life"(P.27) . Her grandmother has always chided her for her curious nature and further cautioned her saying that "for everything's question for everything a retort what husband can be comfortable with that?" (P.11-12.). She is further cautioned and conditioned towards the comforts of her future life partner and that "the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you" (P.138).

One way that silence is used to convey the cultural expectations of women in Indian society is through the use of silence as a tool of control. For example, Jaya's husband, Mohan, uses silence as a way of exerting control over her. When he is angry with her or dissatisfied with her behavior, he will refuse to speak to her or acknowledge her presence. This silent treatment is a way of punishing Jaya, and of making her feel small and powerless. 'A husband is a sheltering tree' (P.137) Jaya came to know the importance of that phrase and recollected Ramu kaka's words that the reputation of a family depends entirely upon a wife or a woman.

Furthermore, Deshpande highlights the household conflict between wife and husband operating at the emotional, intellectual and sexual levels. The silent treatment is often used as a way of exerting control over women in Indian culture and Mohan's use of silence in this

way is not exceptional. The novelist being fully aware of the patriarchal set-up of Indian society does not plead for any kind of confrontation or militancy between Man and women, between husband and wife. Silence, tolerance, sufferance are the ways to be followed by women so as to have happy married life. As this novel is in the feminist framework, so the novelist does not cross the limits of Indian, socio-cultural reality. The metaphor of silence under which the novel is organized helps to impose a quietude and discipline; the inner dynamics of a self cut off from human communication. "That Long Silence" is not an intrusion into the world of silence but a silent communion with the oppressed self-straining for articulation, for a voice. Jaya's marriage has been without love which becomes the reason of their drifting away from each other. The memories of the past, her earlier life and her marriage with Mohan haunt Jaya now and then. In the end of the novel she decides to put an end to her long and painful silence. She reminisces the triumph with which her father had lovingly named her Jaya, 'Jaya for victory.' But after their marriage, Mohan changed her name to "Suhasini" (15). Gradually she had to become Suhasini from Jaya, Suhasini as mentioned in the novel, "a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped" (15-16). Everytime, she tries to break her long silence and struggle with the problems of self evolution and self-estimation, her hopes are dashed to ground. Finally, she realises the need to come out from her house to the outside world in order to establish her self -worth.

Silence is used in "That Long Silence" to explore not only the complex emotional and psychological worlds of its characters but also to critique the social and cultural norms that shape their lives. This theme is explored throughout the novel, and is seen as a challenge that women face in a society that often silences their voices. Jaya struggles to express her feelings and experiences in words, and her silence is a way of acknowledging the inadequacy of language to capture the complexity of her emotions. Not only Jaya but other women also find it difficult to express their anguish and want to be heard. In the early days of their marriage, Mohan and Jaya had a heated argument over Jaya's addressing Mohan's mother 'a cook'. Jaya lost her temper, and Mohan was astounded He could not accept the fact that his wife behaved like this, "How could you? I never thought my wife could say such things to me. *You're my wife . . .*" (82, emphasis mine). So, in order to exert his dominance he stopped talking. Their fight ends and Mohan turned normal only when Jaya became a little softer and took the first step to break the ice. Jaya comprehended the situation that her anger "had shattered him" (82). Jaya understood that women should not show more power than men

because it hurts their male ego. Mohan never tries to understand Jaya or her needs, as Jaya feels that, "We had never come together, only our bodies had done that" (98).

With the passage of time, it becomes Jaya's habit to be silent. She has learnt to remain silent on different events wherein she could have showed her disagreement. Jaya willingly never does anything that would hurt Mohan's sentiments, "I could never laugh at Mohan, at anything that mattered to Mohan. If I did so, it diminished him; and who wanted a dwarfed husband?" (169). The house runs on Mohan's wishes, and Jaya "went along with him" (25). Jaya says, "To know what you want . . . I have been denied that" (25). Jaya does not have any clear vision about her needs and desire. Jaya was quite inquisitive when she was unmarried. Her paternal grandmother, *ajji*, used to tell her that if she asks many questions, it will be very uncomfortable for her in her husband's house. Now Jaya does not ask questions, but even then, she does not find any solace, "So many subjects were barred that the silence seemed heavy with uneasiness" (27). Jaya, while describing her complex inner world that can be conveyed through silence, says that "I had often found my family life unendurable" (4)

This patriarchal society seems to have given men the power and comfort to verbally be angry with their wives and beat them up according to their wishes. P. V. Kane has described that almost all the influential Indian mythological texts have advocated that "the foremost duty of a wife is to obey her husband and to honour him as her god" (Kane 561–62). Mohan has imbibed the ways of his father who was cruel to his mother, but his mother did not respond and executed her duties silently. While remembering his mother, Mohan's comment is, "women in those days were tough" (36), but after listening to his version Jaya finds, "I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender" (36). Jaya's decision to break her silence and assert her identity as an individual separate from her roles as wife and mother is a way of challenging the patriarchal structures of Indian society. She recognizes that her silence has been a tool of oppression, and that she needs to find her voice in order to assert her agency and independence. This theme is further developed through the character of Jaya's friend, Malini, who is also struggling to find her voice and assert her identity in a society that often silences women. Jaya, recognizing the power of silence as a means of asserting oneself and resisting oppression and further realizes that silence is not always an indication of weakness; sometimes it is an indication of strength.

This theme of silence in the face of infidelity is a common one in Indian culture, where the emphasis is often placed on preserving the family structure and avoiding disgrace. However, by using silence as a literary device, Deshpande is able to explore the complex emotional landscape of infidelity, and the ways in which it can shatter even the most intimate of relationships. Jaya's husband, Mohan, has an affair with a younger woman, and this leads to a breakdown in their marriage. However, rather than confronting the issue directly, Jaya and Mohan's relationship is marked by silence and avoidance. Jaya is unable to express her feelings of betrayal and hurt, and Mohan is unable to apologize or acknowledge his wrongdoing. Moreover, the use of silence also reflects the broader social and cultural context of India, where motherhood is often idealized and celebrated, but the fact remains that motherhood is full of sacrifices and sufferings.

Jaya is a mother of two children, and her relationship with them is marked by a complex interplay of love, duty, and guilt. She struggles to balance her own expectations and realities with the demands of motherhood. The novel explores the difficulties that women have in sharing values and experiences to their daughters because of their own crushed souls. Jaya's relationship with her own mother is alive with silence and miscommunication. Jaya feels that her mother is unresponsive, and she could never express her true feelings to her. Jaya gets to know from Mohan's sister Vimla that her mother, while undergoing an abortion, died in silence. Her mother could not tell anyone about her plight. Although Vimla herself regards this fact of her mother's behaviour shameful, but fails to recognise its implications later she also dies in silence. She does not express the pain of sufferings she was going through because of her ovarian tumour, "She sank into a coma and died a week later, her silence intact" (39). However, Jaya's own relationship with her daughter, Leela, is also marked by miscommunication. Jaya is unable to communicate her true feelings to her daughter, and this leads to conflicts between them. Jeeja, the maid in Jaya's Dadar flat, also maintains silence. She has no children of her own. However, she has to raise the two children from her husband's second wife because of the sudden demise of her husband and the second wife. Jeeja has courage to accept life as it is. She harbours no anger and has no one to blame. From her experience, she explains to her step-daughter the importance of kumkum in a woman's life. Indian women fast not only for long lives of their husbands but also to prevent widowhood. Mukta, a neighbor of Jaya in Dadar, is quietly living her life. She used to fast when her husband Arun was alive, but even after his death, she continues to fast because changing habits is not so easy.

Jaya's married life has been going on like this for 17 years, but Mohan's recent scam in his office turns her balanced life upside down. Later, when Mohan gives explanation to Jaya for his action by saying, "It was for you and the children that I did this" (9), Jaya, though she could not say anything, finds it very hard to digest it either. Indira Bhatt opines that Mohan "wishes to use his wife as buffer, an opiate to soften the impact of the forces he has set into motion against himself" (Qtd. in Bala 102). Later on, when Mohan informs her of his decision to move to their Dadar's flat she follows him without any words like the celebrated and often referenced mythological stereotypes Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, "So had I. Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails . . ." (11). However, the thing that surprises Jaya is Mohan "had assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans" (11). It strikes her, and she realizes her inferior position to her husband. Before her marriage, Jaya was free- spirited, "I'll do just what I want!" (75), and had a fearless heart, "I was not so full of fears" (76) but now she does not find any similarities between the Jaya before and the Jaya now.

Furthermore, silence is also used in the novel to explore the theme of identity and self-discovery. Throughout the novel, Jaya struggles to gain her sense of identity and purpose, and is unable to articulate her true needs and aspirations. However, it is only through her silence and introspection that she is able to come to a deeper understanding of herself and her place in the world. By embracing her silence, Jaya is able to confront the cultural norms and expectations that have been imposed on her, and to assert her own agency and independence. Finally, it has also been observed that silence is not always a negative or oppressive force in the novel. There are moments of silence that are powerful and transformative, and that allow for deeper connections and understanding between characters. For example, the silence between Jaya and her sister-in-law, Saroj, is a way of communicating a shared understanding and empathy that words cannot express.

In conclusion, through the portrayal of these characters, the novel offers a powerful critique of the ways in which silence can be used as a tool of oppression of women and domination by those women and men who have power and say in their households. The novelist puts forward a powerful criticism of the oppressive forces that works in Indian patriarchal society on the one hand while on the other hand she forcefully asserts the need of women's sense of individuality and their claim of independence from the clutches of male chauvinism.

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