

Breaking The Silence In *That Long Silence*

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Abstract: *That long Silence* emphasises that the women's suffering is due to the long silence that they maintain. The title *That Long Silence* is very suggestive as throughout the novel we see Shashi Deshpande expressing her shock at tendency of women to silent suffering and death. No one pays attention to their silent sacrifice. To ensure that women find their place in a world that is dominated by men, the novelist urges them to end their prolonged quiet. The protagonist's resolve to speak up and stop her prolonged silence at the end of the novel is a protest against the limitation forced on lives of the women.

Key words: silence, retrospection, accusations, loneliness

In the 1990 Sahitya Academy Award winning novel *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande narrates an Indian housewife's tale of who kept 'silence' throughout her entire life. The title *That Long Silence* denotes, the novel focuses on the women who keep 'silence' under the dominance of men. A British feminist manifesto that is referenced in the epigraph is the source of the novel's title (American actress Elizabeth Robin's speech to WWSL in the year 1907): "If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy the weight of that Long Silence of one half the world". The novel is a protest against the women's life restrictions in this setting. The protagonist's resolve to speak up and end her prolonged silence marks the book's conclusion.

The story of the novel *That Long Silence*'s is presented in retrospect. Therefore, the stream of consciousness method employed in this novel is very effective. The novel opens with Jaya's autobiographical narration.....

I'm writing of us, of Mohan and me. And I know this you can never be the heroine of your own story. Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces. (page-1)

[Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1989.] (All further references are to this edition, and are incorporated in the body of the text itself.)

Jaya is a dutiful wife who has little choice but, to act independently. She feels that after being married she and Mohan are like two bullocks yoked together.

A pair of bullocks yoked together.... it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in the different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain? (p.11-12)

It is at this juncture Jaya's retrospection begins and she realises that at every level in her life, she was forced to be silent. When Mohan was accused of underhand illegal activities, first he accused Agarwal of being responsible for the whole thing. He had said,

Agarwal got me into this, he got more out of it than I have done, he is responsible for the whole thing, not I. (p. 9-10)

Mohan had some hopes of coming out safely. Agarwal was trying to pacify the man, whose tender was rejected in spite of his being a relative of the Minister. Mohan had said,

Agarwal wants me to take leave for a while; he wants me to make myself unavailable (p.11)

and Mohan had already planned to go and live in Dadar flat. He presumed that Jaya would come with him. Jaya says,

..... he had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plane so had I. Sita follows her husband into exile. Savitri dogging Death to retain her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing husband's travails.... (p.11) her

Jaya was compelled to accompany Mohan, similar to Sita and Draupadi of ancient times, rather than existing as an independent woman, living by her own decision as she was the wife of Mohan. She accepted everything in silence lest Mohan would be disturbed as,

To go in different directions would be painful. (p.12)

To pass the period in exile, in anonymity, as Agarwal had advised Mohan, they shifted from their posh Churchgate flat to Makarand mama's Dadar flat. Since this apartment was not very nicely equipped, there was nothing to clean, organize, or rearrange. Though Jaya was not interested in a pompous lifestyle, she had to give in as she was just to utilize his approaches in 'silence'. She stayed 'silent' even as Mohan was collecting art supplies as well as gadgets. It was impossible for her to go her own way as, after all, she was one of the two bullocks yoked together.

But Jaya's silence and tolerance were misunderstood by Mohan. As the days went by, he accused Jaya of being dishonest with him and neglecting her responsibilities. He alleged that she never made an effort to become friends with C.E.'s wife and never even looked to find out what C.E. stood for. He continued by saying that Jaya and the kids were to blame for the mess or muck he was currently in, for whom he was working as hard as he could to make ends meet. He said,

I have always put you and children first, I have been patient with all your whims, I have grudged you nothing but the truth is that you despise me because I've failed. As long as I had my job and position, it was all right; as long as I could give you all the comforts, it was all right. But now because I am likely to lose it all... It's not just you, it's all women. (p117)

She had attempted to defend herself, but she had cringed in his rage. She had to be 'silent'. Jaya was aware that the wife was supposed to listen to the charges made and remain silent, not to dispute or express disapproval. Her Ajji instructed her to maintain 'silence' as questioning and retorting were bad habits.

Mohan was working as a Junior Engineer at a steel plant in Lohanagar when Jaya got married, but he wasn't happy with his salary. Mohan managed to get a job in Bombay. Jaya never tried to know how her husband got the new lucrative job, how he earned the money for their new comforts. Jaya says,

I never asked him how he did it. 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. It was enough for me that we moved to Bombay, that we could send Rahul and Rati to good schools, that I could have the things needed... decent clothes, a fridge, a gas connection, travelling in first class... (p62)

In his fit of anger, Mohan also claimed that he had approached a women's magazine editor about publishing her story. Jaya remembered how Mohan was proud to be a writer's husband and deeply disagreed with her themes since he felt had autobiographical overtones. A husband who could only communicate with his wife through her body was the subject of the prize-winning story. Mohan was upset because he believed the story was written by Jaya about her husband. He had said,

Jaya, how could you, how could you have done it? They will know now, that all those people who read this and know us, will know that those two persons are us? They will think I am this kind of a man. How can I look anyone in the face again? And you, how could you write these things, how could you write such ugly things, how will you face people after this? (p. 143-144)

Jaya wanted to explain to Mohan that a writer did not write about himself or herself. So she had not revealed or exposed her private life to public viewing, but she could not say. She saw Mohan was seriously hurt and therefore she was 'silent' and stopped writing. For Mohan's sake, she stopped writing fiction as well as decided

to start writing for newspapers which nobody finds problematic and column she writes is entitled 'seeta'. She says,

I had shaped myself so resolutely to his desires all these years, yet what was I left with now? Nothing. Just emptiness and silence (p. 144)

Jaya knew every wish of Mohan for the simple reason that she had been attending to him, watching him all the while very closely. She recalls,

Wasn't he my possession, my career, my means of livelihood (p. 31)

In spite of being so patient and silent, Mohan fails to understand Jaya's feelings and he being the 'sheltering tree' walks out on her. Even her son Rahul had flatly refused to come to her when she was worried about him and wanted to see him. Her daughter Rati, instead of trying to know why she had phoned to her asked her to send her brown shoes. Jaya was utterly lonely and worried.

As dejected mother as she was, she could not forget that she had taken care of her children at the expense of her own comfort. The fact that she and her family were in a safe, enclosed, and secure environment under a roof was the greatest gift she would wish for herself; "If Mohan returns, I thought, if only Rahul and Rati come back, we can begin living afresh... (p.182) The desire of getting them back was very strong. Jaya received a telegram from Mohan that all was well after all and he would come back within two days. Rahul and Rati had also come. Jaya decided to erase the 'silence'.

I will have to erase the silence between us. (p-92)

She made the decision to independently and positively play her part. Jay is optimistic. She says,

It is true. We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this life has always to be made possible (p.193).

Consequently, Deshpande ends the novel with the hope that success will eventually emerge, regardless of when it does. Thus, the title *That long Silence* emphasises that the suffering of women is due to that long silence that they maintain. The title that long silence is very suggestive as throughout the novel we see Shashi Deshpande expressing her shock at tendency of women for silent suffering and die. No one pays attention to their silent sacrifice. For the women to find their place in a world that is dominated by men, the novelist urges them to break their long silence.

Works Cited

Deshpande Shashi. *That Long Silence*. Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1989