

Quest for Identity in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract : Rapid developments in different fields, together with cultural confrontations are creating a paradigmatic shift in people's understanding of selfhood and Identity. Identity is a multidimensional word. In Psychology, identity is a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations. Identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual. The term comes from the French word 'identité', However the formation of one's identity occurs through one's identifications with significant others (primarily with parents and other individuals during one's biographical experiences, and with 'groups' as they are perceived). In the novel Shashi Deshpande has endeavoured to show the predicaments faced by a middle-class educated women who are financially secured and are aware of their rights but are still in confusion regarding their real identity and yet continues silence.

Keywords: Cultural confrontation; paradigmatic shift; identity; individuality; endeavour.

Shashi Deshpande has cemented her place in the annals of post-independence Indian literature written in English. She has unquestionably left an impression on her peers with her literary skills and thematic preoccupations. Shashi Deshpande has been deeply troubled by the plight of women in traditional Indian society, and as a result, she has savagely challenged long-held beliefs about the nature of the man-woman relationship and the efficacy of numerous social institutions that have served to systematically marginalise and silence women. Instead of breaking out of the old environment, Shashi Deshpande focuses on the majority of Indian women, who are middle class and are trying to fit in with society. Women are realistically and accurately portrayed in her books and short tales. The 'feminist' inside her vividly depicts the predicament faced by educated women hailing from middle-class households in India; their internal conflicts, quest for identity, interest in children and sex, disappointments with society and feelings of being used.

Deshpande has emerged as a writer taking profound perception into the female psyche who focused on the marital relation and seeks to exhibit the tradition that a woman has been trained for ages to play a minor or secondary role in an outdated home with reference to the Indian context reflecting the conflict between custom and newness which is depicted in *That Long Silence*. With her novels, Shashi Deshpande has achieved a reputation as a writer who adds a strong, unique and culturally relevant feminist voice to modern Indian English literature. She has been applauded by feminist critics for creating female characters who are able to speak and act independently and have enough sense of personal identity as they struggle in virtual isolation, to overcome the various injustices in their domestic and social arena. These characters are mostly educated, middle-class Indian women who are financially secured and have the awareness about their rights and have the ability to speak and stand for a cause, yet... the silence continues.

Some of her women protagonists refuse to compromise with the situation and instead create an entirely new path for themselves, some of the women protagonist choose to deal with their problems and situations within their own cultural setting. They are unable to overcome from the confines of their home but they ultimately make choices that make their life more meaningful and wholesome within their cultural and domestic territory. This emerges from the dilemma that women face in wanting to keep traditions while at the same time, wanting to reject what, in society, ties them down.

In *That Long Silence*, the story of Jaya seems to be the author's mouthpiece which is the realistic picture of every middle class educated Indian woman. They seemed to have all the freedom to enjoy their life but is confined between realisations and restrictions. Shashi Deshpande has shared her views on a variety of topics in her novel, *That Long Silence* including marriage, love, mutual understanding, Gender discrimination, tradition vs modernity, marginalisation and more. Contrary to popular belief, her true motivation is not to gain feminist or any other kind of notoriety but to promote a humanistic world view that rejects categorizations based on race, religion, or socio-economic status. It is socially assumed that women would inculcate in them. This is what happens to Jaya; she wants to speak out all the time, but the elders preaching and teaching prevent her from doing so. Indirectly the author

raises several issues as she describes Jaya's existence, which is full of boredom, irritation, alienation, etc.

Jaya, a girl from a middle-class household, is the protagonist of *That Long Silence*. Jaya learns early on that most people dislike it when she is herself or shows her unique personality, so she keeps it a secret. Jaya calls this period of self-restraints that begins in infancy and continues until middle age that long 'silence' since it encompasses her whole existence. Jaya marries Mohan, a wealthy businessman after she completes her schooling and graduates from college. Marital intimacy and happiness are lacking in Jaya and Mohan's relationship due to their many disagreements. After marriage, she was asked to give up her maiden name 'Jaya' and assume the name 'Subhasini' given by Mohan. Metaphorically, this also means losing her identity as Mohan's wife and cut off the bits of her that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Mohan was a successful businessman. There is no place in their relationship for Jaya to express her point of view, as Mohan expects her to go along with everything he says unquestioningly. Mohan wants her to blindly follow his every word. Jaya takes care of the households while Mohan works feeding him and cleaning up after him as if he were one of their two teenaged children. Her inability to form meaningful relationships with her husband and their children is only one example of the many ways in which she expresses her discontent in her writings. Life becomes very predictable for her and 'the illusion of happiness' that she had long woven for herself is gone :

As time passed by the monotony of her
schedule began taunting her and she had
to admit the truth to herself that she I
had often found family life unendurable.
Worse than anything else had been the
boredom of the unchanging pattern, the
unending monotony.(49)

She realises her husband's apathy towards her. He is never bothered for her emotions, likes and dislikes

To make matter worse, when Mohan is suspended from his job and is accused of corruption and is under investigation, Jaya is compelled to take account of what her life has become. Jaya and Mohan are forced to move from their spacious apartment into a small and dingy one while their children stay behind with relatives. Jaya begins writing more to

supplement the family income. Some of her articles were frank and open about her dissatisfaction, including the way in which her husband is unable to connect with her or their children. She is forced to rethink about her past in an attempt to think who she is. Her self-efficacy leads her to self-realization. It is clear that Mohan needs Jaya's support and love while he faces a trying period. But neither of them has ever been comfortable talking about their feelings and fears with each other. Mohan has no idea how to ask for what he needs and Jaya has no idea how to offer it. Eventually, Mohan leaves the house thinking about what has led to their separation. Jaya understands that she is partly to blame for withdrawing from her husband during his trying time. She recognises that the long silence has stifled communication and openness in her family, making it difficult to support her husband and vice versa. Jaya is ready to accept Mohan back into her life and she vows that never again will she let the long silence separate them emotionally from each other.

That Long Silence of Shashi Deshpande is a notable work which gained much recognition and popularity for its honest and realistic portrayal of educated Indian women of present time. The title itself implies that women do not raise their voice against suppression. Jaya resembles the typical women figures in the writings of the western feminists. The women who always protest and never compromise and imbibe these qualities are accepted as the epitome of feminism. The most brutal interpretation of 'Silence' is related with the submission and surrender imposed on women by their husbands or fathers or their sons who have never allowed women to occupy the central position which has become the monopoly of male exploits. In other words, Silence is a living death for women who have never been encouraged to come out of their oppressive 'Silence' which is killing them inwardly and making them in fact, the slaves of their husbands who are their life partners but have never shared the ground of equality with their wives.

Deshpande presents a sensitive portrayal of Indian womanhood treading the labyrinthine paths of human mind with a rare gift for sharp psychological insights into the subtleties of the human female, supported with rich evocative, unassuming and unpretentious style. They find themselves trapped in the roles assigned to them by the society and attempt to assert their individuality. They confront their husbands and revolt against their family traditions in quest of freedom. They do not try to redefine human relationship and behaviour. They choose to remain with

their families but reject the roles prescribed to them by the society. They try to achieve self-identity and independence within the context of marriage. She concerns herself with the plight of the modern Indian woman trying to understand herself and to preserve her identity as wife, mother and, above all, as a human being.

That Long Silence is an award winning novel depicting the lasting peace of women in the society. Deshpande literally depicts the inner conflict of Jaya and her quest for herself. Jaya represents women who are silenced, silenced by man-made traditions and laws. Her genuine portrayal of women and their internal troubles make her writing sensible and in nature leads to feministic thinking. Jaya is an object of intense empathy. The novel goes on to determine into Jaya's personality through her long tests- social, economic, political, psychological, spiritual and religious. She revolts, but in silence. Jaya is introduced not as a rebellious woman who has a desire to revolt but the one who reconciles her helplessness. A woman can never get angry. She can only be neurotic, hysterical and frustrated. There is no room for despair either.

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Work Cited

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