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The New Woman in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*: A Comparative Study

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Shashi Deshpande's fifth novel and her best work *That Long Silence* and Bharati Mukherjee's 2nd novel *Wife* have marked similarities with regard to the central episodes they present. Both the novels are psychological, highlighting the problem of communication between wife and husband, as well as quest for self-identity. Both the novelists focus on the concept of 'new woman'. Jaya in Deshpande's novel and Dimple in Bharati Mukherjee's novel have the heroines as the protagonists who struggle between tradition and modernity. In both the novels except the heroines almost all the characters remain flat. The essential problem remains the same: 'The problem of communication'. Both novels deal the predicament of an Indian wife finding her self-identity. The wives are forced to take stock of their lives when their husbands are suspected of fraud. They remain silent probing into their past, struggling with their present and trying to establish a rapport with their future. There are similarities thematically as well as significant differences.

Psychological novels in Indian writing in English started only recently. Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Das, Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee and Shashi Deshpande are some of the novelists who dealt with the aspect of 'psychological' characters in their novels. Salman Rushdie, Shashi Deshpande, Sobha De, Bharati Mukherjee reveal the inner conflict in the 'psyche' of women in patriarchal society. In her second novel *Wife* story reflects the author's mental status in many of its parts. Bharati Mukherjee herself remarks in '*Days and Nights in Calcutta*' (1977: 268). "A young Bengali woman could rebel by simply reading a book or refusing to fast". At the end of the story, being suppressed by such men and attempts to be the ideal Bengali Wife. She contemplated many ways to commit suicide. Out of fear and personal instability, she is ultimately driven to different kind of violence by murdering her husband and eventually commits suicide. *The Chicago Tribune comments*, "Bharati Mukherjee has built a small, fine provocative novel that sparkles with the accuracy of its detail and rings with an inner terror and truth." (*Wife*: Penguin, 1990).

Bharati Mukherjee (born in 1940, Calcutta, India) an Indian born American Writer, is best known for her novels; *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It To Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004) and *Miss New India* (2011). She received National Book Critics Award in 1988 for the *Middle Man and Other Stories*. She co-authored with her husband Blaise with her work *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977). Mukherjee's second novel *Wife* where the first one (*The Tiger's Daughter*) ends. Currently she is working as a Professor at the University of California at Berkeley.

Shashi Deshpande, one of the distinguished contemporary women writers of India, was born in 1938 in Dharwad, Karnataka. She was the second daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar Adya Ranga Charya (Sri Ranga). She studied in Dharwad in Karnataka and at the age of fifteen she went to Bombay, where she graduated in Economics and worked for a couple of months as a journalist for the magazine *on Looker*. She published her first collection of short stories in 1978, and her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* in 1980. She won the *Sahitya Akademi Award* for her novel *That Long Silence* in 1990. She won *Padma Shri award* in 2009. Her novels deal with issue of modern, educated, middle class Indian women by maintaining an excellent balance between the two extremes – tradition and modernity. Her novel *Roots and Shadows* won a prize for the best Indian novel of 1982-83. Her most recent novel *Shadow Play* was short listed for *The Hindu Literary Prize* in 2014. Some of her other novels are *If I Die Today* (1982), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983), *The Binding Vine* (1992), *A Matter of Time* (1996) *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving on* (2004), *Country of Deceit* (2008), *Ships That Pass* (2012) etc.

Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee depict the anguish and conflict of the modern, educated, Indian women caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand and present self-expression, individuality and independence for the women on the other hand, they explore the inner psyche of Indian woman to fulfill herself as a human being independent of her traditional role as daughter, wife and mother. Both the novels (*That Long Silence* and *wife*) reveal the women's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identify. There is a major thematic resemblance which is seen in *Wife* and *That Long Silence*. Both are women centered and the novelists have dramatized the protagonists search for 'identity', self and individuality who have broken away from their cultural and historical roots. Shashi Deshpande usually describes Indian women in her novels. Her sincere attempt to break the silence of women has been widely acclaimed in home and abroad. She has presented the Indian women as facing the very dilemma of having chosen between modernity and convention. Bharati Mukherjee too moves in the same direction and presented her revolted women by breaking their silence.

The novel *That Long silence* opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan shifting from their well settled, comfortable house in Dadar, Bombay, where they had stayed immediately after getting married when their financial condition was not good. They shift into their old apartment as Mohan has been caught in some business malpractice and an enquiry is in progress. Though Jaya has been educated and influenced by the modern thought of west and other advanced countries, she still wants to compare herself with the images of Sita, Draupadi, and other ideal mythological characters.

In the novel *Wife* also Dimple's vision of 'Sita' docility, sacrifice and responsibility is a flag with many messages. In Dimple's dreams, she becomes Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legends, who walked through fire at her husband's request (6), such pain, such loyalty seemed reserved for married women. In *That Long Silence* Jaya which means victory is the name given by her father when she was born and 'Suhansini', the name given after her marriage which means "a soft smiling, placid, motherly woman" (15-16). Both the names symbolize the traits of her personality. The former symbolizes 'revolt' and the later 'submission'. She longs to be called an ideal wife, but revolts in silence. She comments on a situation when her husband talks about women being treated very cruelly by their husbands and he calls it 'strength'. He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I

saw despair. 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). In the novel *wife* also there is a similar event. Her parental home has given the name ‘Dimple’ to the protagonist which means any ‘slight surface depression’ (According to the Oxford English Dictionary). But her in-laws objected to the name Dimple, which is considered too frivolous and un-Bengali (14).

“My mother wants to call you ‘Nandini’, she does not like Dimple as a name”(17). Dimple tried to get used to being called Nandini, but she thinks that the new name is not suited her as she doesn’t sound like a Nandini (18). The dreams of these two protagonists shattered by the environment, the surroundings and above all by the society which imposes all sorts of restrictions on women. Absolutely they are thrown into helpless state of dilemma and unable to do anything to improve their situation as married women. In the *wife* Dimple with psychic defect naturally reacts in peevish way to all the things around her. The lake reminds of her death: “She hated the lakes, thought of them as death”(8). Her drab surroundings in Calcutta fill her with frustration. “Everything is fine” she said dropping her voice as low as she dared,” except for the apartment. The apartment is “h-o-r-r-i-d”(18).

The problem between Dimple and her husband Amit Basu is one of communication and an inability to come to terms with reality. Dimple is a far simpler character whose dreams are purely materialistic. All she wants out of life is a marriage to a neurosurgeon (a strange choice) and luxuries of consumer society. Marriage, she was sure, would free her fill her with passion. Discreet and virgin, she waited for real life to begin (13). She marries Amit, an engineer who wants to immigrate to U.S.A., the golden land of opportunity. After marriage Amit revealed Dimple by expressing his ideas that what kind of person he would like to get married earlier which made her surprised and worried.

“I always thought I would marry a tall girl. You know the kind I mean, one meter sixty one or sixty two centimeters tall and slim. Also convent educated, fluent in English” (26). There was nothing she could do about her height except stand straight and dress wisely. But what excuse could she offer him for her spoken English? When her husband turned the corner, she stole the basic conversational English book from a book case in the living room.

There is also a similar event about the matter of English communication in the novel *That Long Silence* From the very beginning, Mohan wanted a wife who was well educated and cultured. He made up his mind to get married to Jaya when he saw her speaking English fluently, sounding so much like a girl whom he had seen speaking English fluently. He tells “You know, Jaya the first day I met you at you Ramukaka’s house, you were talking to your brother Dinkar, and some how you sounded so much like that girl. I think it was at that moment that I decided I would marry you” (90).

She has been ready for Mohan who told her this soon after they got married. He had wanted to marry a girl who can speak good English.(90). The statement had amazed her. In her stream of thoughts, Jaya too looks at her marital relations where there is no conversation left between them. This unhappiness is reflected not only in her conjugal life, but also in social life. Her books and her stories lack anger and emotion and she becomes a failed writer as her writings are rejected by the publishers. And when finally, Mohan angrily walks out of the house, she feels that

she has failed in her duty as a wife. She recalls the tradition of act and retribution and compares herself with Kusum: “An act and retribution – they followed each other naturally and inevitably” (128).

When Mohan leaves the house without informing her, Jaya feels that she is being neglected by her husband in the same manner as she had done with Kusum. There grows a silence between the husband and wife which creates gap between them. Mohan keeps on asking questions, but she does not find a word to answer them: “I racked my brains trying to think an answer” (31). But her silence on such issues, like her own writings, puts one into doubt. As Veena Seshadri writes

One ends up by wondering whether Jaya has imposed the long silence on herself not out of a sense of duty or to emulate the ideal Hindu woman of the ages gone by, but in order to camouflage the streaks of ugliness within her (1988).

Her negative approach coupled with her habit of discerning and analyzing every situation causes a havoc in her personal life. Her covert superiority complex makes her think, not only of herself but also of others which causes a type of irritability in her marital conduct. All the troubles emerge from their unequal cognitive status. Shashi Deshpande tries to project through the female protagonist, who at the end chooses to break her long silence of the past. It is not only her own silence that Deshpande highlights but the silence of each and every character in the novel. As Veena Seshadri Points out:

The novel is not only about Jaya’s efforts to obliterate the silence that is suffocating her, It is also about the despair and resignation of woman like, Mohan’s mother, Jaya’s servant; Jaya’s mentally disturbed cousin, Kusum. It also deals with Mohan silence which is the silence of a man who speaks but can find no one to listen to him Mohan’s character is perhaps deliberately weakened in order to glorify the image of woman as a prudent wife; Jaya describes the character of her husband thus, he had his old air of authority and confidence. Then the old self vanished, leaving behind a sad, bewildered man (8).

Here Deshpande presented not a woman who revolts openly in the beginning and later on reconciles the situation but kind of woman who wants to revolt, but ultimately does not. Her inner turmoil is so bitter that she is unable to speak them out and remains in order not to be frustrated and disappointed after the disapproval of her actions by the society. Her silence indicates that the conventional role of woman still has all over newly acquired professional role. Maria Mies after doing sociological survey points out:

The career woman has not only to face the opposition of her surroundings and to struggle against many objective obstacles, but she is often divided in herself because she also often subscribes to the Indian idea of womanhood. Her problems arise, firstly, from the contradictions between this image and the demand of a new social situation and then from the discrepancy between new aspirations and lack of opportunity. (“The Novels of Shashi Deshpande”, P.43).

There are many similarities in both the novels presented by the novelists. In both novels the protagonists husbands were engineers by their profession who led to the disturbed state in their profession which was hated by their wives. They had to fight for their right position in the society in order to satisfy their wives by fulfilling

their dreams as new women they sought. Both Jaya and Dimple have to face the strong opposition of their surroundings.

In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* two histories intersect, the history of the narrator's family and the history of women in India. As she emerges from a personal crisis, which to a degree reflects the wider situation, the narrator concludes that life has always to be made possible (193). Both the novels are similar in form. Both Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee follow a retrospective technique, giving the impression of being psychologically driven in their returns to past. However, there are important differences. Deshpande's *That Long Silence* commences with a crisis and moves between the developing crisis and the past until resolution is reached, and she has the first person narrative. But Mukherjee on the other hand, ends her novel with the violence of murder, in an unconscious state of mind of Dimple and she has the third person narrative. There is a painful moment and event where the narrator penetrates her own disguises. The ultimate vision is similar in both the novels but event is different. In both the novels the protagonists Jaya and Dimple married engineers. The substance of life is experienced by the protagonists is same, behaviour, systems belief in traditions and cultured, middle class educated self - broken all are discussed, observed, revolted. In both the novels the protagonists Jaya and Dimple developed close association with other males in search of their self – identity. In *That Long Silence* Jaya has an intimate relation with Kamat and in *Wife Dimple* with Milt Glasser. They become rebellious and finally revolted. But the final events are different, one ends with silent conflict and the other ends with the event of violence.

As Dimple addicted to media she begins to lose her sense of balance and sense of reality. The brutal death of her husband Amit, seems meaningful yet at a deeper level it is the product of suppression and fear that experienced by the woman protagonist. His death may remain an act of cruel and 'pointless' violence. But in *That Long Silence* on the contrary to reader's expectation Jaya armed with new knowledge, does not turn her back to her marriage. Instead, she marches ahead with renewed vigour to breathe new life into it. As the return of Mohan's 'All well' (192) (his telegram says), reveals she has to break her *That Long Silence*. The Panic has gone. "I'm Mohan's wife. I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible as "Two bullocks yoked together" (191).

Shashi Deshpande's protagonist faces the predicament of revolt in silence while Dimple's predicament transcends that of an individual enmeshed, in a world of crime and cultural shock. She seems to be symbolically destroying the bond of marriage as a 'new woman'.

The marriage bond which is still sacrosanct in India, is gradually breaking down under the pressure of new needs in a different background. Most immigrant Indians suffer from different types of maladies. They find themselves half way between the continuity of traditional Indian values and the influence of progressive American ones. "Woman on television got away with murder (81)." This is precisely what happened to the life of Dimple. She is helplessly caught in the quest for an identity as an American woman. She is frustrated with her married life and murders her traditional Indian husband. Thus the wife in Indian tradition here becomes an ironic entity. Dimple lacks a real, open communication with her husband. Which is similar to Jaya's seventeen years long Silence in *That Long Silence*.

Women's speech is not a new topic either by literary studies in general or by early modern studies in particular. The culturally constructed link between speech and gender has been examined by many critics. Historically real women are the 'silent ones'. Their 'silence' is linked to the suppression of their ability to assert themselves both verbally and sexually.

The woman's issue in India is different from what is in Western countries. Here the woman's quest for identity and survival becomes a major discourse. The writers who are conscious of the 'othering' of women need to, as Shashi Deshpande puts it", Make ordinary women understand the possibility of power, of being able to control their own lives. And to have this power not as mothers, not as devoted wives, but as ordinary women, as humans (The Indian Journal of English Studies, 2008: 34).

In *That Long Silence* Jaya too proclaims in the end, "I'm not afraid of any more", the panic has gone" (191), with this is a 'new woman' emerges, one who is confident and beaming with inner strength. She realizes her worth as a woman and this discovery leads to self realization. Shashi Deshpande points out:

The woman in my books are people who come to realize what is to be a woman in the process of their own lives and the situations they face not through books and theories. I think feminism is an entirely personalized perception. It is when you start questioning preconceived notion about your roles. (Times of India, No.25 November, 1989).

DeshPande creates in her novels female characters that are more close to life. Their joys and sorrows are real. Their cravings and aspirations are familiar. They fight the male domination in their own way, not by over throwing their marriage bonds and balancing their new-found individuality and self-identity, as wife. This suggests a change in woman's outlook and experience a shift from acceptance of the age old idea of the self – suffering wife to a new urge to live as a self-respecting woman. These novels have, however, a few common techniques as the protagonists are women as wives, sufferers, and rebellions. Thus the way the story was built up is similar to each other. The pain and frustration and the problem of communication are the common features. The wives in both the novels are middle class, educated, Indian women who protest against patriarchy. The narration proceeds the wife point of view. At the end both Jaya and Dimple become more confident with inner strength and become new women. Both the novels are women centered and deal with the contemporary reality of the 'new'. Both the protagonists quest for self-identity, which is highlighted in the two novels.

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