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Jaya: A Product of Society in *That Long Silence*

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Abstract:

In the Indian society, women are being venerated as goddesses, but it is the same society that forces a woman to extinguish her identity after marriage. It is ingrained in her mind from the childhood that her father's home is her temporary abode and her real home is her husband's house. She yields to the societal pressures and annihilates her personality completely. Many Indian writers have projected the plight and predicament of women in the Indian society; but Shashi Deshpande has minutely and artistically drawn realistic pictures of the middle class women in her novels. Her focus is on educated women who get entangled in the societal web and lose their real self. *That Long Silence* is Shashi Deshpande's most acclaimed novels where she has presented the plight of an educated woman Jaya. It is really a matter of concern that despite being educated, Jaya remained submissive and could not escape from the tentacles of the society. This paper shall examine the novel *That Long Silence* from the feminist perspective.

Keywords: society, predicament, self, identity, web, entangled.

In the Indian society women are being venerated and worshipped as goddesses. The woman is celebrated as the most powerful and empowering force in the Indian Holy Scriptures but the same society expects her to be submissive and obedient to her father and husband. In *Manusmriti*, it is written that "as a girl, she should obey and seek protection of her father and as a young woman her husband, and as a widow her son". (6) There are diverse and conflicting views on the position of women; ranging from feminine leadership as the highest goddess to limiting her role to an obedient daughter, house-wife and mother. India women are brought up on models portraying selflessness, self-denial and sacrifice. Nature has bestowed innumerable blessings on a woman but the society has assigned her specific roles. Simone de Beauvoir's statement "one is not born a woman, but becomes one" holds true to Indian society where young girls are brought up to be obedient wives and daughters-in-law. They are being taught to be submissive and sacrificing.

Under the aegis of femininity woman follows the dictates of an ideal, largely created by men to ensure that man has top place in the patriarchal society. As such, men become the standard by which women are measured and reduced to passive objects. Many Indian writers have projected the predicament of women in Indian society but Shashi Deshpande has meticulously articulated the emotions and feelings of Indian women. In her award winning novel, *That Long Silence*,

Shashi Deshpande becomes successful in transforming the central protagonist Jaya's mute suffering which is a result of society in which her role is defined by the patriarchy. In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande's chief thematic concern is the central protagonist Jaya's struggles, in the context of contemporary Indian society, her effort to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother and most of all as a human being. Jaya is a victim of gender discrimination, first as a daughter then as a wife. She is enmeshed by desires and despairs, hopes and fears and is unable to defy social conventions or traditional morality.

The novel revolves around Jaya and Mohan, who belong to a middle class Indian Brahmin family. She has an incompatible relationship with her husband that results out of the dominating patriarchal society in India and it leads to frustration in their seventeen year old married life. She is also disappointed with her two children due to claustrophobia of her own childhood. These all begin to surface in her small suburban Bombay flat where she shifts after her husband is fired from the job due to his malpractice in the place where he works. Shashi Deshpande gives the reader an exceptionally accomplished portrayal of a woman who is trying to come out of the long silence which begins in her childhood. When she was born her father named her Jaya, which means victory. Jaya, a father supported child, had been brought up in a family, in which modernity of thoughts dominated traditionalists. Her parents had given a blow to their families by marrying against their wishes. This helped Jaya to think herself different. Her father often said:

“You are not like others, Jaya,” Appa had said to me, pulling me out of the safe circle in which the other girls had stood... “You are going to be different from others,” Appa had assured me. (136)

After her father's death, she feels alone, and prefers to stay at hostel, than her home. She feels herself completely detached from her mother. Her mother 'Ai' doesn't support her in any way which makes her more feeble and vulnerable. She always prefers her sons. Her mother's preferential treatments wound her more and make her resentful. They want to relieve their responsibility left on their shoulders by her father. She is made to believe that husband is like a “sheltering tree”(32). Jaya marries Mohan, an Engineer by profession. Mohan is an ambitious and materialistic person. He wanted to marry an educated girl who could speak English fluently, for his elevation in societal setup. Jaya was beautiful and convent-educated, after her marriage her husband gave her a new name- Suhasini which means gentle, silent and submissive. Mohan's father had been very cruel, dictatorial with his mother. She tolerated his cruelty in silence and Mohan grew up in this kind of patriarchal set up where submissiveness was an embellishment of a woman's character. His image of wife was created by the subjugated woman that he had seen in his family. Jaya bears all the responsibilities with devotion and dedication. She finds herself in specific roles in every situation. She was told that everything is the responsibility of wife and nothing is attached to the husband.

In Indian society, women after getting married forsake their identity which they acquire in their childhood. They are not allowed to carry the name of father, but husband; Ramukaka says to Jaya that she is part of Mohan's family and she doesn't have place in their family as she got married.

Look, Jaya, this is our branch. This is our grandfather- your great grandfather – and here's father, and then us- Laxman, Vasu and me. And here are the boys – Shridhar, Jannu, Dinkar, Ravi. "But Ramukaka, I exclaimed, I'm not here! You! He looked up, irritated by the interruption, impatient at my stupidity." How can you be here? You don't belong to this family! You're married; you're now part of Mohan's family. You have no place here. (142-143)

She is made to believe that her sole responsibility is the happiness of her husband. "Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you." (138)

Jaya totally absorbed herself in Mohan's family; from an independent girl she completely submerged into the stereotype of a woman- "nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support." (76)

Jaya didn't have any ambition after marriage. She transformed herself completely to please her husband. On her husband's directions she takes to wearing huge dark glasses, gets her eyebrows shaped and hair cut short to look exactly the wife of an executive. She puts on a new face of Suhasini to please everyone. Jasodhara Bagchi writes that "Indian woman is the pure vessel of virginity, chaste, wife weak and owned by her husband, or the self-denying mother, never an independent identity. (1-4). Every time an Indian woman extinguishes bits of her personality to prove herself as an ideal daughter, an ideal wife, mother, in short an ideal Indian female.

As Suhasini, she shares everything with Mohan, what a wife is supposed to do, but unknowingly she forgets Jaya, her real self. Like a typical Indian house wife, she loves her husband so intensely that waiting for him becomes a part of her daily activities. She says:

Ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait, waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant tiffin carrier. (30)

She never complains about anything. In Indian society, woman is expected to please her husband and she is not expected to complain. "Did I hurt you?" "No". Each time, after it was over, the same question and my reply too invariably the same – 'No'. (95)

Subsequent of her first quarrel with her husband, Jaya learns that women should never be angry. For Mohan, anger makes a woman 'unwomanly'. 'My mother never raised her voice against my father however badly he behaved to her, he had said to me once. (83) Jaya compromised all her desires for marital harmony.

Jaya, like mythical Indian women Sita and Draupadi is forced to live a life of exile, separated from her children with her husband, to camouflage his false reputation.

I remember now that he had assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans...the truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together...it is more compatible to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would involuntarily choose pain? (11-12)

During her exile she turns the gaze inwards and rediscovers her lost self "Jaya". To soothe her turbulent mind she takes recourse to writing and finds solace in her new role. She reveals her suppressed self through the realistic stories of man-woman relationship in her writings. Jaya's story not only gets published in a magazine but it also wins a prize, but to her utter disappointment her husband Mohan, becomes critical and blames her for dishonoring the sacred vows of marriage, by exhibiting their personal life to the world. She thinks:

I had known then that it had not mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except her body. For Mohan it mattered that people might think that couple was us, that the man was him. To Mohan, I had been no writer, only an exhibitionist. (144)

Mohan found it annoying to see his personal life's reflection in Jaya's writings "How can you reveal us, how can you reveal our lives to the world in this way?" (144)

Suhasini suppresses her little self to please her husband because in our society a woman is assigned a secondary role and is relegated to secondary position. To keep her husband and children happy, she sinks her personality, yet she remains subordinate to them.

"Scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had my marriage." (144), she gives up writing fiction and shifts to writing snippets in newspapers, she once again assumes new identity by adoring a fictitious name Sita, completely alien to both Jaya and Suhasini. The pseudonym 'Sita' selected for writing light, humorous pieces in the newspaper is symbolic of her attempt to mould herself like Sita, the mythical image of an ideal wife with no questions, no retorts; only silence. But in Indian society Sita's chastity was doubted and she was put on the pyre to prove her purity. In Indian society husband's will and social conformity becomes most obligatory for a woman.

Mohan blames Jaya and her children for his state of affairs, whatever he did was to improve the prospects of his family. The truth is that Mohan had a clear cut idea of what he wanted in life. He had experienced the pangs of poverty in his childhood and he wanted a sophisticated life and a luxurious home. Her husband's allegations disintegrate her and she feels completely shattered. He accuses her of being so indifferent towards him and she tells Mukta:

All these years I thought I was Mohan's wife; now he tells, not really, what am I going to do? What shall I do if he doesn't come back? Mukta, I was so confident, so sure of myself, I felt so superior to others... Kusum, yes, and you too... and now, without Mohan, I'm... I don't know what I am (185)

She decides to reincarnate her original self which was hidden under the disguise of Suhasini. She decides to express her real feelings through her writings, the feelings she had suppressed due to her husband. She decides to break the long silence and live her life.

Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails...No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can't fool myself. (11)

She feels that she too has contributed to her oppression and her silence was responsible for her failure as she admits that:

It's not just that life is cruel, but that in the very process of our birth we submit to life's cruelty. I had learnt it at last no questions, no retorts, only silence. (143)

The centuries old sheltering has made woman too meek to lead an independent life, this is feminist dilemma that forces Jaya to observe such a long silence despite being a writer. Jaya is deeply distressed as her husband Mohan crushes both the woman and the writer in her. The writer in her expects her to express her views and experiences before the society but the clash between the writer and the house wife demands silence. In Indian society parents encourage the education of their daughters, but they are instructed to build up the status of the families they belong to. The woman has to follow the dictates of her husband without questioning. The deep rooted patriarchal culture teaches a woman that without husband, a wife is unprotected and vulnerable. Jaya is being brought up with these age old traditional beliefs:

And so, you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it without deceits and lies.(32)

In Mohan's house, the roles of women were sharply defined: "...so definite about their roles, so skillful in the right areas, so indifferent to everything else." (83) She blindly follows her husband's ideology which results in her long silence. Shashi Deshpande has raised an important point that despite torture and troubles, women lack the courage to revolt against the societal norms. The societal traditions have strong roots and can't be uprooted easily. Based on the patriarchal institutions and values, women are socialized to be good, obedient daughters, wives and daughters-in-law. They are trained not to challenge any kind of discrimination, subordination and subjugation. The society has an upper hand to prepare and guide them to remain suppressed all their lives. Jaya, too being an educated Indian woman is a product of society where it is an obligation on woman to extinct her personality after marriage. But once she

realizes her inner potential, she gains the strength to liberate herself from the shackles of male dominated society.

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