

Jaya's Quest for Self in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

S.Somasundari Latha

Shashi Deshpande, the sahitya Akademi Award winner for *That Long Silence* writes about women and their quest. Deshpande has eight novels, six short-story collections, four children's books, numerous essays and articles to her credit. Her protagonists are educated, middle class women who become hapless victim of marriage life and its responsibilities. Her women protagonists are in constant search for their 'Selves'. They perform several roles – daughter, wife and mother, exhibits several 'selves' and they engage in recognizing their real self. Deshpande speaks about this in her *Small Remedies*.

There are so many selves in us which are called forth by other human beings, selves which are dependent on others for their existence. I know how I changed because of Leela and Joe, how Adit made me into a person I could scarcely recognize myself, how living with Som, some of the fine dust of his careless generosity, his ease with people, was sprinkled on me as well. Sometimes I wonder whether there is, infact, a pristine self in us, which will be revealed only when we are totally isolated from others. Or, whether, without others, we are nothing. A blank slate. But for all of us, there's a self inside which we recognize as our real selves¹

Jaya, the protagonist in *That Long Silence*, having got in the current of the traditional role of a woman – wife and mother has suppressed her existential self. Though she has a happy home with his well earning husband and two children Rati and Raghul and material comforts, she feels fed up with the monotony and fixed pattern of her life: Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, and unending monotony (P.4). In her attempt to rediscover her 'true self', she finds herself as an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer. Suman Ahuja reviewing the novel for *The Times of India* observes that Jaya caught in an emotional eddy, endeavors to come to terms with her protean roles, while trying albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self, which is but a ephemera of unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer.²

Jaya's husband Mohan is involved in corruption in office at the instigation of Agarwal in contracts, tenders and commissions. When they are not able to do favour for minister's relative, they are forced to face enquiry. Agarwal advises Mohan to move to from church gate house to somewhere to avoid unnecessary publicity and shame. Jaya's family moves to Makarandmama's flat in Dadar. Fortunately their children are away with the neighbour's family. Mohan who is disturbed because of the final disgrace which the enquiry will bring, takes excuse by saying that he has engaged in malpractices to keep his wife and children comfortably, 'I did it for you, for you and the children'(p.10). This creates a real sense of anger in Jaya. Her stays with Mohan in silent resentment paves the way for self-evaluation and self-criticism. In her re-examination of her married life, she discovers that she is not really happy. Happiness in their married life is only on illusion. Jaya does not enjoy her individuality. Like mythical women – Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails, Jaya follows Mohan to Dadar flat. She thinks:

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

She is named 'Jaya' by her father which means 'victory'. Her father has brought up her as an 'individual'. Later Mohan has given her name 'Suhasini' which means a soft smiling, placid, motherly woman (p.16). Like Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist Jasmine loses her identity by being called by several names, Jaya also loses herself and identity. Her aunt Vanitamani's advice is, 'a husband is like a sheltering tree'(p.32). Jaya who is curious and shrewd and questions each and everything maintains absolute silence after marriage. She recollects her ajji's words:

'I feel sorry for your husband, Jaya whoever he is', she had said to me once.

What for, ajji?

Look at you – for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that?

Though there is no question, there is no comfort in her married life. That silence seemed heavy with uneasiness. (p.27)

Jaya's servant maid Jeeja has the opinion: "Don't forget, he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that" (p.53). Jaya plays the role of a typical Indian wife at the loss of her real self. Women are prepared to face one thing – marriage irrespective of their education, status, and intellect. Mohan's mother and sister also have undergone all the tortures of patriarchal society. Mohan's mother silently bears the insult implicated upon her.

Silently watched by the children, she picked up the plate, cleaned the floor and the wall of all the spattered food, and wiped it... When the boy finally drifted off to sleep, she was still sitting there in front of the fire, silent, motionless. (p. 36)

Mohan thinks the silence of her mother is her strength. But Jaya feels the silence is the result of despair: I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter than silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender" (p.36). His mother has died while she gets herself aborted. Mohan's sister who has an ovarian tumour with metastases in the lungs, like her mother silently undergoes suffering and dies at last. Jaya is in no way different from these women. She also cultivate the tradition of silence and plays her sole as wife and mother skillfully. When Mohan is deprived of his busy routine life, he becomes restless because he is not used to 'waiting'. But Jaya feels always she has been waiting.

Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your laws home. Wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married, I have done nothing but wait. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for the children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home (p.30)

She becomes fed up with this kind of waiting for something or somebody and expects some disaster which could bring a change in the routine life. Jaya is not a feminist. She plays the

traditional role of woman – a dedicated wife and a dutiful mother. Not able to bear his allegation that she fails in her duty to support him at the time of crisis, she begins to laugh without control. Insulted and irritated Mohan leaves the house that leads her to engage in self-introspection. She wants to shout at Mohan, “ I didn’t mean to laugh, I wasn’t laughing at you, I was laughing at everything – marriage, us, this whole absurd exercise, we call life” (p.155)

The silence of woman symbolises helplessness. But men take it as a symbol of woman’s contentment. Rashmi Gaur observes:

“Jaya’s journey towards a well-defined self-hood is mired in the labyrinthine mazes of societal pressures, feminine conditioning to fashion oneself according to the accepted norms of behaviour, suppressive and egotistic male chauvinism and the continued dilemma of attaching a purpose to her life, culminating in a ling silence. Her silence is symptomatic of alienation and apprehension rioted in every woman’s soul in different forms – a silence which is often misunderstood by men as a symbol of woman’s contentment”.³

Jaya’s distant cousin Kusum never voices her opinions. Since she has internalised all her anger and maintain silence, she takes rescue in insane world. In her madness, she can be ‘ gloriously’ herself (p.127).Entry into insane world is a kind of escapism. When this sane world is too much for her, she jumps into the well and kills herself. Like Kusum there are so many women in the society who silently swallow their pain and sufferings.

Kamat, a lonely young widower lives above Jaya’s apartment. Jaya’s writings receive comments, criticism and encouragement from Kamat. Jaya enjoys her intimate friendship with Kamat by sharing her opinions and ideas about her stories which she could not do with Mohan. She admires him for treating her as his equal and only in his presence, she can be in her own self.

It had been a revelation to me that two people, a man and a woman, could talk this way: with this man, I had not been a woman. I had been Just myself.(p.153)

No doubt Mohan encourages her to write but the way he expects. Her writing is also a kind of breaking the silence. RajeswarisunderRajan argues,

Deshpande’s protagonist breaks her silence at one level through the act of writing itself ,at another level through renegotiating interpersonal relations within the family”⁴

One of her stories has won the prize where she has made a mention that a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. This hurts Mohan because he is afraid that people would think that the man is Mohan and the woman is Jaya. Jaya doesn’t want to jeopardize her marriage and thereby she changes her style of writing. As a result, all her stories have been rejected and she stops writing. Even Kamat points out that her stories lack anger. He suggests her to give her personal view and spew out her anger, “why didn’t you use that anger in

your story? There is none of it here. There isn't even a personal view, a personal vision. I'll tell you what's really wrong with your story. It's too restrained. Spew put your anger in your writing, women spew it out. Why are you holding it in?" (p.194)

This is the problem not only with Jaya but also with all women writers. They tuned their mind and ways of life according to the need and expectation of men. Since Mohan thinks, for a woman, to be angry is to be unwomanly, Jaya set her mind not to be angry even in writing. She confines her thoughts and defines her role according to the expectation of her husband. Naturally she has lost her 'true self'. Anger which has been internalized has turned her to be nervous and incompetent. She says:

"...no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman? ... A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated" (p.147).

Jaya married Mohan as he had decided to marry the convent educated, cultured Jaya. After the marriage also Jaya found him a stranger. Intimacy with him had seemed a grotesque indecency (p.94). In their physical union he would ask, 'Did I hurt you?' and her answer is 'No'. It is sex that bring both of them together not love. She realises love is a myth, without which sex with the same person for a lifetime would be unendurable. (p.97)

Jaya has shaped her life according to the desire of Mohan and loses her own self and identity. She admits:

It hadn't been Mohan's fault at all. And it had been just a coincidence, though it had helped, that just then Mohan had propelled me into that other kind of writing. 'I encouraged you', he had said to me. He was right. But, I went on with my chest-beating out of penitence, Mohan had not forced me to do that kind of writing. I'd gone into it myself with my eyes wide open (p.148).

Jaya willingly patterns her life to keep pace with Mohan's likes and expectations. In a mood of frustration she feels for the loss of her selfhood. 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 (p.1). Jaya's looking at herself as Mohan's wife, and his children's mother but not as an individual is pathetic. The sense of loss of her identity and self makes her say: 'I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife' (p.191).

Jaya's self-examination of her married life has brought to light that she is partly responsible for the loss of her real self. The seventeen years of their married life brings boredom, dullness and monotony instead of intimacy and friendliness. In her effort to be an ideal wife she loses her life in the name of sacrifice. Her failure to be an ideal wife and mother is revealed by her: "I've failed him(Mohan). He expected something from me, from his wife, and I've failed him"(p.185). Her incapability to deal with her son Rahul's complexities make her say: "A mother?... I had been unfit to be trusted with the entire responsibility of another human being" (p.178).

This kind of self realization helps her to find the reason for the unhappy married life. She understands the consequences of suppressed anger. Her silence is nothing but suppressed anger. Silence or lack of communication is the cause of 'marital incompatibility'. She decides to break her long silence to restore peace and happiness. She decides "to plug that hole in the heart... I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to ease that long silence between us" (p. 192). She decides to be assertive and to be of her own self. S.P.Swain observes:

The tragic predicament of the Deshpande protagonists is the outcome of male-domination in a patriarchal culture. Their silent suffering is socio-psychic in nature. In her quest for identity, the Deshpande protagonist moves from despair to hope, from self-negation to self-assertion. Her struggle throughout is to attain wholeness, completeness and an authentic selfhood."⁵

She bids good bye to her silence, anger and resentment. She realizes her self-worth and decides to give up the pre-fixed norms of the society. Rashmi Gaur observes:

"The haunting riddle of the ultimate purpose of a woman's life within the family can be solved when she learns to assess her worth as an individual and shuns to be guided by pre-fixed norms about it".⁶

Jaya's decision to exercise her rights is a welcome one. She wants to liberate herself by respecting her feelings and desires. Kamini Dinesh finds Jaya moving out of the 'cloistered self' as she seeks to escape from the struggles of everyday life and is forced to find inner resources that will allow her to return and engage more fully in her life and marriage.⁷ Jaya's optimistic view of life that changes are possible, exposes the transformation she has undergone.

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