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## Voices in the Silence: Reading Some Selected Texts of Shashi Deshpande

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In Shashi Deshpande's novels, Silence takes different meanings. It is the penetrating needle that can utterly ruin a human relationship. At other times, silence becomes the instrument of protest, a defence mechanism, and a strong resistance to a force which if it cannot be omitted has to be endured. It becomes the source of strength and support but within this façade of strength her characters are sometimes found unable to sustain the deeply pent up emotions and give vent to it in resounding cries. Deshpande is attuned to the voices behind the silences. In this paper I wish to study the varied use of this silence in the three representative novels of Deshpande - *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *That Long Silence*, and *A Matter of Time*.

*"Words, words, words, I thought. Sometimes they can obscure the meaning of life. They can hide the fact that there is nothing behind them. They will spend all their lives talking to these people and never reach anywhere."* (Deshpande, DHT 155)

The self is defined as the 'totality of man, the sum total of conscious and unconscious existence' (Bhattacharya 145). According to Jung, the "persona is the conscious part of the psyche and is in direct contact, through the senses organs and muscles with the external world" (Bhattacharya 145). This is the personality of an individual, the image of himself that he represents to the world and which is observable from without. The 'ego' forms the central part of this conscious self. Below this conscious self is the 'personal unconscious' wherein the repressed material of the conscious is saved. Deeper inside this self is lies the unconscious. It is this impersonal or collective unconscious which preserves the racial and inherited contents of the thinking, feeling and imagining processes experienced by the ancestors of the human race in the form of what Jung calls 'archetypes'. The 'individual' consciousness stands between the lines demarcating the personal and the collective unconscious.

The structure of the mind therefore, has three different layers – the conscious, the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious which is the inherent ideology influences the self to a great extent. It forms an important influence on the thoughts, feelings and emotions of an individual. Age old traditions and customs, myths and legends are an important component. The 'conscious is the 'persona' – an image of the self that an individual puts in front of the society. This is also the 'image' of his interrelations with other individuals as a social and rational human being. Below this conscious lies the personal unconscious which stores the repressed feelings of the conscious mind. A harmony between the repressed feelings of the personal unconscious and the 'ego' of the conscious mind takes representation in different modes of action. Silence is one of them.

Shashi Deshpande's novels present the realities of women's lives and the truth that lie behind their silences. She deals with subjects that have remained for long forbidden topics, such as

marital rape etc. In an interview to BBC, Deshpande had once said ‘ I was speaking to a male relation about a woman in the family who’d had a very hard life, terrible really and I was so astonished to hear the man say that her life was ok, he said “well; she never complained, did she?” And then I thought maybe you didn’t hear her because your ears weren’t tuned to her voice, I think for me that really brought women’s silences and what I call the deafness of a lot of people to women’s silences, that’s been an important motif in all my work”. In her writings, Deshpande has explored the different meanings of silence, giving them a new form of voice.

The word ‘silence’ recurs many a times in the course of the narrative in the three novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence* and *A Matter of Time*. When Deshpande first begun to write, she suffered from this sense that her writings were not being adequately analyzed “ I had no one with whom I could speak of my writing, no companionship of like-minded people. There was no feedback to tell me whether that I wrote had any merit. Cloistered in a house with two young children, I had the additional disadvantage of low self –esteem and indifferent health.”(Deshpande. Of Concerns, Of anxieties) It was with the publication of her short story ‘The Intrusion’ that Deshpande had a sense of power within, of knowledge, of the personal unconscious collaborating with the conscious. This gave a voice to the “intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society.”(Deshpande, DHT 2)

Silence has multiple meanings. Without the figurative text, silence has its own language of a thousand words. These words speak of thoughts, feelings and emotions. In the narrative of the novels, the personal unconscious takes its conscious form many a times in the use of silence. Silence, then becomes a word which though explicitly simple acquires multiple layers of implicit meanings. This intrinsic nature of a silent expression becomes revelatory for the characters. At times, silence becomes a penetrating disturbance, at other times it becomes a defence, contentment, despair, rejection, terror etc. Deshpande has explored these varied aspects of silence in her novels.

Silence is the language of the absence of words. When words fail to explain behavior, silence shapes it. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, a woman- Saru’s adoration and love for her life partner is murdered by the inhuman treatment of Manohar on the marital bed. The shock and resentment arising out of this forces speech into silence and Saru can only cry out “Nothing issued out of me but silence.”(44)

The recollection of memories may sometimes become strenuous and tedious. At such times, the rejection of memory calls for repression of the emotions involved. The conscious mind is submerged in the deep recesses of the personal unconscious and silence takes the form of rejection of memory. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru rejects the memory of her dead mother at home and Manohar’s abuses during her stay in her parent’s house. This kind of rejection however turns out to be a defence statement for Aru in *A Matter of Time*. Gopal’s rejection of the memories of the earlier happier times with Aru nullifies the feelings of love still intact in Aru’s heart. For Gopal, silence on his part is a realization that of being unable to confront the truth, of being unable to explain one’s own conduct. Gopal’s silences may not speak much in explanation rather it may lead us to think that Gopal is lost in the mazy corridors of his own reasonable/unreasonable thinking. For Aru, his silences however reflect only an escape mechanism to avoid responsibility.

The mind co-relates the past with the present. When Saru opens the almirah of her mother, she is drawn by the photograph taken long ago. A small bundle with a 'choli' brings memories of the ceremonies that were never held. The memories become at once sweet and sour – of deprivation, of consolation, a satisfaction that the mother has suffered too. In the tug of war, voice takes the form of silence – of the moment that has passed away, of the moment that was now going away. This sudden breaking of the past into the present has its own fears “The fear that by speaking she would be unlocking the door of a dark room in which someone has been murdered. That by opening the door, she would be revealing to the world the pathetic, lifeless body of the victim, grotesque in an enforced death. And her greatest fear was that they would all know the dead body to be his, her husband’s.”(Deshpande, *A Matter of Time* 274) At other times, it is the fear of losing social image. In *A Matter of Time* when Aru sobs at losing her house, of living almost in and out of a railway platform, the others – Sumi, Kalyani, Ramesh are moved to stunned silence. This silence is an acknowledgement of a truth that they already knew but repressed and concealed in their hearts. The pitter-patter of the rain drops on the mango leaves in the dark night mingles with the quiet of the atmosphere in Sumi’s room giving her a sense of déjàvu, of a realization, of a consciousness that new life has to be begun alone, of a time in the past spent without the companionship of Gopal and the desire to return there. This silence provides her strength, of fighting away the hopelessness of her present situation. When Gopal and Sumi meet for the last time the few words instinctively spoken “Yes, it’s late. Baba will be worrying...” (39) bring in a host of memories; they stare at each other in silence for a moment enjoying the memory. The past comes alive and lives with the present. Silence is the voice of this memory.

Silence answers the unanswerable such as when Renu questions Saru about Dhruv, her brother. When Saru returns home after many years, her domineering mother and feeble minded father have changed position. She becomes an observer and realizes that her mother never had a room of her own- ‘a human space’ that she could call her own.. Her parent’s room had only been her father’s and her mother had confined her life in the kitchen. She had effaced her presence from everywhere else. In *A Matter of Time*, Sumi frontiers her grief with silence, she submerges the bottled up pain in the guise of ‘silence is strength’. However, this silence breaks as Sumi gradually learns to share her grief with her mother Kalyani and daughter Aru.

Shripati’s ( Kalyani’s husband) silence envelopes Kalyani with rejection – a punishment that does not end with death. “Why doesn’t Baba ever come down? Why doesn’t he have his meals with the rest of us? Why doesn’t he ever speak to Kalyani ? She is his wife, isn’t she? And why is she so frightened of him? He rings the bell and she responds, he controls her from a distance. What has Amma done to make him behave this way towards her?”(*That Long Silence* 82).For Aru, such questions remain shrouded in mystery but are revealed later on. Shripati blames her for the loss of their only son Madhav. But then Aru questions, couldn’t Kalyani have called out for help. Madhav as Kalyani had said was a troublesome child, did she want to get rid of him by any means. The truth remains covered in silence.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya encounters a terrifying form of silence in Mohan. “I had ignored his silence at first, but when it had gone on, not for hours but for days, it had unnerved me.”(36). Silence in this form of defence mechanism has been used many times in the narrative of both *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence*. When Saru is asked about her mother’s death in the hospital chamber by Prof. Kulkarni, for a second the personal Saru crosses the professional Sarita. It is silence that works as a defence to stop the exposure of Saru’s background. In *That*

*Long Silence* both Mohan and Jaya take the mask of silence. Silence becomes the language of day to day activities. In Mohan's mother, silence becomes the language of resistance 'Mohan finds strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire'(36) But her silence is the language of deep –rooted feelings of remorse and protest. Jaya finds in her silence "a despair so great that it would not voice itself...a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender. "(36). Kamala Das in her poem the '*Death of the Goat*' speaks of a similar drudgery that becomes part of women's lives:

*The only woman of the house was ill*

*The one who used to run about at home like a mad dervish , busy with her chores.*

*The one whose hollow cheeks and spindly legs*

*Made the children say, oh mother, you look*

*So much like a goat!*

*When they wheeled her into the hospital*

*She opened wide her delirious eyes and said:*

*Please let me go*

*I smell the Tur Dal burning...”( Deshpande, Gauri .10)*

Silence has no words but its varied aspects would leave any lexicographer dumbfounded. Mohan's mother does not die a loser, in her strength of will and courage; she proves the silence in herself. She dies a woman who has her own will at the end, breaking the configuration of her husband's dictatorship and the accepted social code of conduct. Vimala, with the same silence fixed on her lips dies a similar death, her sufferings convulsed to a smile in her face. When Mohan questions about the 'seeta' fortnightly, Jaya writes "I said nothing. It was so much simple to say nothing. So much less complicated."(143). Thoughts are often suppressed in silence. This defence mechanism is sometimes displayed in order to belong to a set group. A personal deviancy leads to conflict. When Ramukaka tells Jaya vehemently that she does not belong to the house, Jaya is hesitant, she desires to question Ramukaka "...if I don't belong to this family, what about kakis and Ai? They married into this family, didn't they? Why are they not here/ and what about Ajji, who single handedly kept the family together, why isn't she here? But I had said nothing – neither to Ramukaka, nor to Mohan. Ajji should be pleased with me. I had learnt it at least – no questions, no retorts. Only silence."(51)

Silence may also result from the fear of a possible contender. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, when Abhi is born, Renu retreats into silence. In '*A Matter of Time*' Sumi is perturbed at the sight of Gopal's behavior that fatal evening. There is the vision of an impending gloom which Gopal fails to envisage and yet fears. Kalyani at the sudden realization that she is standing side by side with Shripati sinks into silence. Sudha finds her contender in death and is lost in the "world of loneliness she suddenly finds herself in."(13). Silence becomes an essential part in the life of Madhav, Saru and her father. This silence is not from fear, but results from a feeling of contentment. Silence in many cases, comes from the ghosts living within – from concealing.

“And then I knew that ghosts are not as I had imagined always other people, the ghost most fearful to confront is the ghost of one’s old self “. (60)

In each of the aspects discussed, the personal unconscious, the repressed feelings rise in the conscious mind as a mode of expression. Here, the conscious mind makes a conscious effort to repress the thoughts of the mind thereby holding within himself/herself the ‘ghosts’ of the psyche. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, when Saru puts back the things in the almirah she begins to think confusedly. “I’m now the skeleton in my own cupboard.”(69). The horror of their marriage takes the shape of a disease like “syphilis or leprosy, something that cannot be admitted to others”(85) and this very concealment makes it all the more disgusting. Saru defines this in concrete terms “Poor little scared boy, who never grew up to know that the dark holds no terrors. That the traitors are inside us all the time. We carry them within us and the traitors they spring out, when we least expect them to scratch and maul.”(217). In *A Matter of Time*, Gopal says “we carry our places of exile within us. It entered into me too, the day I learned the truth about my parents.”(52) Behind Gopal’s silences lie innumerable questions relating to the purpose of existence. ‘Emptiness I realized then is always waiting for us. The nightmare we most dread, of waking up among total strangers, is one we never escape. And so it’s a lie, it means nothing, it’s just deceiving ourselves when we say we are not alone.’(144) Here, silence takes the form of despair. When Sumi and her three daughters are moving out of their old house, for a moment as they stand and take the huge task in, it almost seems impossible to them, their silence becomes a cry of despair. In *That Long Silence*, Mohan confuses Jaya’s silence as a finger of accusation. There is despair in Mohan as he wonders what will happen when the children come back and a feeling that silence in Jaya means that she does not care anymore. For Jaya too, Mohan’s silences mean almost the same “I had shaped myself resolutely to his desires all these years, yet what was I left with now? Nothing. Just emptiness and silence.” (220) Silence, thus is loaded with various meanings. Most often it is the menace that brings suffering, anguish and despair.

Deshpande insists on the need to break these silences and each of her characters find their own voice. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru realizes the truth behind these silences – “ All right so I am alone. But so’s everyone else. Human beings...they’re going to fail you. But because there’s just us, because there’s no one else, we’ve to go on trying. If we can’t believe in ourselves we’re sunk.”(chatterjee 41), she finds her voice through her medical profession because it is humanity above all individuals. Jaya writes her own interior monologue that takes the form of the novel. Sumi takes to writing plays for school kids and is later offered a school teacher’s job. The girls Aru and Charu find their voices too. Saru, Jaya, Sumi, Aru and Charu are characters who break this fold of economic dependence and create a space for themselves. Contrary to the silent sufferings of Kalyani, Mohan’s mother or Vimala, these women carve out a niche for themselves in the public sphere as did Yamunabai to transform her vision into reality – for to dream by itself is a threshold to creation. This is not resignation but a beginning, a new hope. Jean Paul Sartre has defined what he called the ‘Being-for-others’ as a mediation between an individual’s idea of self and the identity that the other creates. Sartre says that this gives the individual a consciousness that “I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the other.”(Sartre 246). Sartre explains that it is the appearance of the other which puts the individual in the position to pass judgment on himself/herself. The image created by the other about the individual affects the individual if the image projects a bad portrait of himself/herself because it results in an ugliness or baseness of character which is not the individuals. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya asks “But what was that ‘myself’?” “Trying to find oneself” what a cliché that has become. As if such a thing is

possible. As if there is such a thing as oneself, intact and whole, waiting to be discovered. On the contrary, there are so many, each self attached like a Siamese twin to a self of another person neither able to exist without the other.”(69)

“Don’t struggle, don’t swim against the tide. Go along with it...they will tell you about economic independence and an independent identity. Forget the words. If Draupadi had been economically independent, if Sita had an independent identity, you think their stories would be different? No, these are things that have been voluntarily surrendered, consciously abandoned because that is the only way to survive. And what in the long run matters, more than survival?”(DHT 137-138). In the novels however, it is the mesmerizing image of another woman- economically independent, financially secure individual who influences the characters. Saru is enchanted by the figure of a doctor. “I knew instinctively that she was somehow superior to all the other women there. Later, as the women talked, I knew she was a doctor ...But I could be a doctor, yes, that would be the key that would unlock the door out of this life which even then seemed to me dreary and dull.”(140) Young Vidya’s transparency of thought and expression influences her. Surekha, the lawyer becomes an important influence on the young Aru. As a result each of the characters Jaya, Saru, Sumi, Aru and Charu find their own voice even in the silence within and around themselves. Silence, therefore becomes strength for them. Words fail to acknowledge existence, but silence registers it. It is only through a proper orientation that weaknesses can be converted to strength. And this strength lies within the self for

You are your own refuge

There is no other refuge

This refuge is a hard to achieve. (DHT 8)

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