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Silent whimpering of Caged Birds

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Abstract:

Marriage is a sacred Institution, which involves two opposite sex united in wedlock, expecting to allow equal share and space in everything. When there is mutual love and respect, the marital relationship has a smooth sail and saxophone a mellifluous melody in the garden of Eden. Throughout the novel 'That Long Silence' Silence exposes a long string of feelings like protest, objection, fear, pain, suffering and endurance despite of diverse social status of women characters. Silence, an ever-present theme in the novels of Shashi Deshpande makes its presence eloquent throughout her novels. Socially structured and culturally conditioned, her protagonists find themselves helpless in the roles set to them by society, but achieve self-identity and independence within the confines of their marriage. Breaking of silence by her protagonists makes their voice heard. A man has to realise that, his wife is not an automaton programmed to accomplish all household chores and shelve into silence whenever admonished

This article explores the nuances behind the silence of the protagonist Jaya in the novel 'That Long Silence', who attempts to resolve her problems by a process of temporary shelving into her own self and realises her true identity only after breaking her long wrapped silence.

Keywords: Mystic silence, dominant male patriarchy, female protagonists, defence mechanism, frustration and disappointments, long cocooned silence.

Silent whimpering of Caged Birds

The inarticulate silence in the womb and in the tomb gets articulated in the yawning space between these two. It gets in to the very fabric of Human beings, breathes itself into the diaphragm to get embryonic linguistic origin- metamorphosed into language with various hues of emotions affixed to it.

This mystic silence finds its echo reverberating in many of the fictional corpus of the contemporary feminist writers, wherein, the protagonists incubate this silence well within the periphery of her strained psychology. Caught in the maze of the dominant male patriarchy, these female protagonists, are scourged on the cross of sufferings and made to wince in pain in absolute silence.

Winner of the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award, Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent contemporary women writers in Indian writing in English. Since her protagonists are socially structured and culturally conditioned, they find themselves helpless in the roles set to them by society, but achieve self-identity and independence within the confines of their marriage. They use 'silence' as a defence mechanism to show their protests and to muddle through their problems. Silence is an omniloquent theme in her novel, *That Long Silence*. This article explores the nuances behind the silence of the protagonist Jaya, who attempts to resolve her problems by a process of temporary shelving into her own self and realises her true identity only after breaking her long cocooned silence.

Jaya's silence is symbolic of most of the women of the world who are unable to express and assert themselves as individuals. Most of the marital relationships in Deshpande's fiction are characterized by silence. Her protagonist exercise silence to find an easy way from all the maze and vortex of sufferings. Jaya, in *That Long Silence* symbolizes the silence of the entire womankind.

Jaya after her marriage with Mohan, decides to perform her role as "duty bound wife" confining herself to the prescribed norms of the society. Mohan's ideas about womanhood are based on the women of his family where they are trained to perform their well defined roles ordained to them by the society. Subsequent to her first quarrel with her husband, Jaya learns that women should never be angry. For Mohan, anger makes a woman "unwomanly". He even quotes his mother's silent suffering in spite of her husband's harassment as strength while Jaya considers it a misery. "My mother never raised her voice against my father however badly he behaved to her," he had said to me once." (TLS 83) In the aftermath of the quarrel Jaya could not bear the silence of her husband and so to avoid such circumstances, she begins to compromise all her desires for marital harmony. She becomes aware that her words of resentment affects Mohan's personality. This realisation freezes her in to silence as she is scared of hurting Mohan which in turn would turn her marriage to doldrums.

Once married, a woman steps in to her in-law's Palace (??), gets dislocated from her parents and relocated in an alien house, wherein many odd situations with their hoods await to assault her. Thus uprooted, every woman is an immigrant, a total alien in her own native soil. Loosing her identity, right from her name (replaced by her spouse and with a crown Mrs. in front of it), and right from assimilating the values and practices of his house and dancing to his tunes in the name of compromise, she stands aloof, with her cries lost in the wilderness. In this transformation, she loses her own self, her joys, her dreams, her poetry but saves her tears, only to well up now and then in her eyes. When the Society accepts these loss of identities as Legal and expects every woman to integrate them into hers, and be



typical of any Indian Bhahoo, any deviation from this norm will marginalise and tattoo her as a total MISFIT.

In Mohan's perception a successful life can be measured with the parameters of lucrative earnings, wearing expensive clothes and talking good English and sending children to good schools whereas, Jaya longs for a happy life as depicted in commercial advertisements. It is in fact the demanding structures of the Society that taught the women to be docile, submissive, breathe happily even with bottled-up bitter feelings inside their diaphragm and also not to cry out with high decibel sound.

Jaya becomes aware that her words of resentment affected Mohan's personality. She was scared of hurting Mohan which in turn would strike a discordant note in her marriage. She always reserved in mind the advice given by Vanithamami that, "a husband is like a sheltering tree" (TLS 32) and Ramukakka's words, "Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you" (TLS 138) She moulds herself completely to the needs of Mohan by stifling her needs and desires. When there was more compromise than true love it affected the continuity of the marital relationship between Jaya and Mohan. Jaya compromises all her desires in silence as she understands that, "I knew his mood was best met with silence." (TLS 78)

Their inability to express their real feelings keeps them both detached. This unfriendly atmosphere in her seventeen years of married life drives her towards extra-marital relationship with Kamat, her neighbour in Dadar flat. Kamat turns to be a reliable companion for Jaya and his "gift of casual, physical contact" amazed Jaya and for her. He criticizes Jaya's writing in an encouraging way that cheers her. Jaya feels to be individualistic only in the presence of Kamat as she says,

With this man I had not been a woman. I had been just myself – Jaya. There had been an ease in our relationship I had never known in any other. There had been nothing I could not say to him. And he too . . . (TLS 153)

But unfortunately, Kamat dies unexpectedly. Knowing his death Jaya leaves him deliberately in silence as she is scared to acknowledge her furtive relationship with Kamat for the fear of devastating her marital life. However, she carried this guilt throughout her life.

Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted. Her role as a wife and mother meticulously doing all household works fails to provide her with any intellectual and emotional fulfilment as she admits, "Mohan's wife. Rahul's and Rati's mother. Not myself." (TLS 69) When one of her novels won the prize her husband was not happy. He finds fault with the theme of Jaya's story and related it to their life and admonishes her not

Her frustrations and disappointments in her marital life begin to haunt her. Jaya's stay at Dadar flat helps her to re-examine her relationship with Mohan. Mohan's departure gives her ample space to self-interrogate her inner self. In her introspection she decides to put an end to the guerrilla warfare which she has waged with her husband for long years. She comes to understanding that her life comprised mostly of compromises rather than true affection. She finally comprehends that she too was responsible for her failure in understanding her husband and her children. She also admits that Mohan was not the sole reason for the end of

her writing career. In her confession to Mukta, she accepts her failure and feels herself inferior without Mohan in her life. She says,

I'll tell you what's wrong. I've failed him. He expected something from me, from his wife, and I've failed him. All these years I thought I was Mohan's wife; now he tells me I was never that, 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.' (TLS 185)

By way of writing she achieves articulation of her torments and thereby starts to break her silence as she says, "I will have to erase the silence between us" (TLS 192) She understands that silence can never make their married life meaningful.

Jaya who initially performs her role as stereotyped house wife, depending entirely on her husband like a crawling worm in to the hole for safety, finally understands and accepts that she too has contributed to her own oppression. As Vinay Kumar Pandey states, "She realizes that she was being defeated: her voice was being hushed up by the male-dominated society. Towards the end of the novel Jaya emerges as a bold and mature woman who refuses to be merely a shadow that has been at the roof of all troubles in her life." (60) Her earlier belief of two bullocks yoked together moving in same direction and same speed is to avoid pain and discomfort. After a long struggle in her search for true identity she decides to break "that long silence" that she has maintained in her seventeen years of married life with Mohan. Jaya states, "If I have to plug that hole in the heart", I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us." (TLS 192) She sums up with a positive note that,

I'm not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible. The child, hands in pockets, has been with me through the years. She is with me still. (TLS 191)

Marriage is a sacred institution, which involves two opposite sex united in wedlock, expecting to allow equal share in everything. When there is mutual love and respect, the marital relationship has a smooth sail and saxophone a mellifluous melody in the garden of Eden. But, if any one of the partner fails to be accommodative and refuses space for the other, then it is a 'Paradise Lost' scenario. In his frantic search for the material possession, Mohan totally ignores the true yearnings of his wife. When care and concern for the partner is lost, domestic peace is also lost. A man has to realise that, his wife is not an automaton programmed to accomplish all household chores and shelve into silence whenever admonished.

Silence is very powerful like the still waters of deep sea...but, it is not always and altogether silent. On extreme provocation, it will slit open its Cocoon and take dashing wings, unfetter itself from the cloister, emerge from the deep unfathomable ocean as tsunami in a demonic shape and proportion, just to retain its self respect if it is shuttled and racketed by



any. This is in fact the power of silence which runs as an intertwining streak in the novel 'That Long Silence' of Shashi Deshpande.

Throughout the novel 'silence' reveals a long string of feelings like protest, objection, fear, pain, suffering and endurance despite of diverse social status of women characters. Silence as an ever-present theme in the novels of Shashi Deshpande makes its presence eloquent throughout her novels. Breaking of silence by her protagonists makes their voice heard. As Deshpande in her article on "How to Read – or Rather, How Not to Read the Writing of Women" rightly puts in, "Jaya decides to continue with her marriage, it is not because she is accepting the traditional role of a wife; on the contrary, she has rejected all the traditional ideas of roles in the course of her thinking. As she says, she has begun to see the world differently. And therefore, she goes back into the marriage a changed person, knowing her life can never be the same again." (14) Thus, Shashi Deshpande in portraying Jaya's silence, suggests women to break their silence of protest to identify their own true self.

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