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Erasing That Long Silence: The Search for Space, Identity and Freedom

Piyush Kumar Singh
Research Scholar
Department of English
BHU

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is one of the leading Indian English novelists of today. Her persistence with the theme of "Woman Question" in her novels and short stories occasionally raises doubts in our minds that she has taken sides with the problems of womankind, pushing the other half into the subordinate role, but this is far from the truth. She is not an aggressive feminist-quite unlike Lord Tennyson's princess who set up an academy solely for women, having barred the male entry strictly-who wants to live in an isolated tower, having no truck with the male world. Deshpande knows it well that this kind of existence is not possible in the real world, and that man and woman are the two equally important wheels of the chariot of life. Her attitude is, therefore, balanced one, and does not create any fissure or fragmentation in man-woman relationship. And it is clearly reflected in her fictional writings.

That Long Silence (1988) is precisely a novel of this nature.

Key words: Woman Question, That Long Silence, Deshpande.

Shashi Deshpande's women protagonists refuse to compromise and instead create an entirely new path for themselves, some choose to deal with their problems within their own cultural identity. They are unable to completely break free from the choices of their homes but ultimately these women make choices that make their life more meaningful and wholesome within their cultural and domestic territory. This emerges from the dilemma women face in wanting to keep traditions while at the same time, wanting to reject what, in society, ties them down. The story of Jaya, who seems to be the author's mouthpiece in *That Long Silence*, is the realistic

picture of every middle-class, educated Indian woman-seemingly she has all the freedom to enjoy but she is confined between realizations and restrictions.

Jaya, the protagonist, is an educated, middle-class woman who lives with her husband Mohan and her two children, Rahul and Rati. With "Well-educated, hard-working people in secure jobs, cushioned by insurance and provident funds, with two healthy, well-fed children going to good schools" (5), what else could she ask for from life? She was a dutiful wife, an mother and was-carefully being-dutiful to her in-laws and her relatives. Mohan too was the perfect husband. The family was picture-perfect, like "a glossy, coloured advertising visual, We smiled, we laughed; I, the mother, served them with low and care'; Mohan, the head of the family, smiled indulgently, and the children were lively and playful" (4).

After completing her graduation, Jaya gets married to Mohan and settles down for her role as a dutiful wife to an extent that she is asked to give up her maiden name "Jaya" and assume the name "Subhasini" given by Mohan. Metaphorically, this also means losing her identity. Her father names her Jaya which means victory. But she is renamed Suhasini, a milder and more submissive one. She is twice displaced; once when she is renamed Suhasini by her husband and second when she renames herself as Seeta to pursue her writing. She has always made compromises to please her husband. She had almost assumed her identity as Mohan's wife and "cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife" (191).

Life becomes very predictable for her and "the illusion of happiness" that she had long woven for herself is gone. As time passed by the monotony of her schedule began taunting her and she had "to admit the truth to myself that I had often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony" (4). She realizes her husband's apathy and growing indifference towards her. He takes her for granted; and is never bothered for her emotions, likes and dislikes. To make matters worse, Mohan is accused of corruption and is under investigation. He goes in hiding for a few days and all this sets Jaya thinking. She is forced to rethink about her past in an attempt to think who she is. Her self-efficacy leads her to self-realization. She, at last strives to break her long silence and goes on to search for her identity and her individuality. As David Buckingham analyses the issue of The identity, he very rightly observes:

Globalization, the decline of the welfare state, increasing social mobility, greater flexibility in employment, insecurity in personal relationships-all these developments are contributing to a sense of fragmentation and uncertainty, in which the traditional resources for identity formation are no straightforward or so easily available. Like many contemporary authors, Bauman emphasizes the fluidity of longer so identity, seeing it as almost infinitely negotiable, and in the process perhaps underestimates the continuing importance of routine and stability. Nevertheless, his general point is well taken: "identity" only becomes an issue when it is threatened or contested in some way and needs to be explicitly asserted. (2008: 1-2).

For Jaya her identity is threatened. She is groping for an identity. When a magazine asked her a bio-data she found herself *agonizing over what I could write, what there was in my life that meant something. Finally, ...only these had remained: I was born. My father died when I was fifteen. I got married to Mohan. I have two children and I did not let a third live" (2). We find here two very pertinent issues: Jaya's problem of identity and her tendency to define herself in terms of others (someone's daughter, someone's wife, and, someone's mother). She did not have much to talk about herself. She experiences a constant conflict of being her own self and being "a good wife", "a good mother" and "a good daughter". The way in which her conflict is designed and structurally implemented reveals traditional roles delineated to each gender in Indian society. Being a patriarchical society, we have defined roles for men and women.

In some respects, Simone de Beauvoir's trenchant observation, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other," sums up why the self is such an important issue for feminism. This outside is spoken of in the spirit of the Levisian 'other', and other that calls for a responsibility to its absent presence, other to be engulfed within. This can be seen in Derrida's reading of Heidegger and Nietzsche, trying to come to terms with the figure of 'woman' in Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles: "There is no such thing as a woman, as a truth in itself of woman in itself" (1979: 101). He goes on to say, "...If style were a man, then writing would be a woman" (1979: 57). Woman is to man what madness is to reason; "a constitutive outside, a wholly other". Considering that woman is outside the dominant discourse, she cannot speak. As Gayatri Spivak writes in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation, the figure of a woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the Third World Woman' caught between tradition and modernization. (1994: 102)

Traditional Indian cultural narratives are pervasive and serve to typify personal identity and experience. These cultural narratives portray Indian women as wife and mother, nurturing, obedient, forbearing, soft-spoken, and the primary transmitters of the ethnic culture. More prevalent, however, is the cultural identity of Indian woman as wife and mother, subordinate to her husband and his family, forbearing to her family, moral and obedient. These categorical identities or "formula stories" reinforce cultural expectations and perceptions of morality.

The personal narratives, of how an individual (read woman) makes sense of her life as opposed to these formula stories, have to be constantly re-created, negotiated and challenged because they do not neatly fit into these formula stories. But the foremost identity of woman is defined as a wife and mother. Cultural practices in India have always acknowledged patriarchy and the belief that men are dominant/superior to women. According to the traditional Indian cultural narrative, women are expected to maintain the home and family, and exercise unconditional self- sacrifice and nurturance. The traditional Indian female identity places women in a very restrictive role. Education, for example, is seen as a means to increase the social status of women for the purpose of finding a more desirable husband and not viewed as a tool to increase their independence or move forward in their careers. In Femininity, Feminism and Gendered Discourse, Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra very rightly remark:

Assumptions about what constitute more feminine as opposed to more masculine ways of talking are constantly being reinforced in everyday interaction, and the of "gendering" individuals is on-going and dynamic. Denying this is misleading and potentially damaging to the feminist enterprise, as we elaborate below. In the early nineteenth century, for instance, normatively feminine ways of talking entailed being largely silent in public spheres. And even after women gained the right to be heard in public contexts, they faced the consequences of a "gendered division of linguistic labour" which ensured they often found it difficult to participate on equal terms with men. Women's voices were considered by the BBC, for instance, to be "unsuitable for 'serious or symbolic occasion[s]', though acceptable in more "frivolous' contexts". (2010: 3-4).

Good or bad, most women allow relationships to define them. Most women are scared of being alone. They get their sense of worth from being someone's wife, daughter or mother. As Jaya says: "Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine- as Mohan's wife, as Rahul's and Rati's mother. And so I had crawled back into my hole. I had felt safe there. Comfortable, Unassailable. And so I had stopped writing" (148).

Probably Jaya stopped writing because of many reasons- of Mohan, because of apathetic people like Laxman Kaka and most importantly because of her own fear of failing. Jaya blames everyone and everything for not writing. "I gave up my writing because of you," I said to Mohan, and he seemed astonished (143). Mohan did not appreciate Jaya on winning a prize for her story; he rather reproached her saying, "how could you, how could you have done it?... They will all know now, all these two persons are us, they will think I am this kind of a man, those people who read this and know us, they will know that they will think I am this man. How can I look anyone in the face again? And you, how could you write these things, how could you write such ugly things, how will you face people after this?" (143-44).

Jaya could never retaliate, she could never protest or resist and her creative skill was oppressed under the weight of her silence.

And the silence is so over-powering that it engulfs everything Quoring Rajan: "The force of Deshpande's indictment women's lines lies in the way she is able to universalize the silence, chiefly by drawing similarities among Jaya and a variety of other female figures, including characters from Indian histo and myth; and among three generations of women in her fami daya, her mother, her grandmother); among different classes women (Jaya, her maid Jeeja); among different kinds of wome of the same class and generation (Jaya, her cousin Kusum, her widowed neighbor Mukta)" (1993: 83).

At many a time silence acts as a strong weapon of protest but for Jaya who had been silenced since her childhood silence becomes a defence mechanism. Because, as Jaya says, woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There's no room for anger in my life, no room for despair either. There's only order and routine-today, I have to change the sheets; tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms; the day after clean the fridge..." (147-48).

Silence is part of a woman discourse. Even if women wan to speak out, they were always silenced. As Sara Mills writes "the discourses which circulated within the nineteenth century around the question of women and reading are simply evidence of the great difficulty which women found in inhabiting the discursive structures laid out for them which stressed their duties and obligations as wives and mothers and did not hold out space for them to negotiate their own pleasures" (1997: 90), it becomes all the more evident by reading the following passage from Thomas Broadhurst's Advice to Young Ladies on the Improvement of the Mind and Conduct of Life (1810):

She who is faithfully employed in discharging the various duties of a wife and a daughter, a mother and a friend, s far more usefully occupied than one who, to the culpable neglect of the most important obligations, is daily absorbed by philosophic and literary speculations, or soaring aloft amidst the enchanted regions of fiction and romance. (Cited in Sara Mills, 1997: 89).

Though this piece of advice may seem to be an instruction manual for the expected role of a woman which is defined to be a good wife and mother, it also discourages the behaviour a woman should not possess, in this case reading, which could prove as a detriment to her obligatory duties.

Similarly, for Jaya, she was initially encouraged to write "light, humorous pieces about the travails of a middle- class housewife. Nothing serious..." (148-49). She writes what some her husband and others want to read not what she wants to write. And when she did what she wanted to she was scorned at by Mohan, ridiculed by Laxman Kaka and dismissed by the magazine's editor as "a middle-class stuff, women's problem" (146). She did not want to "jeopardise the only career I had, my marriage" (144) by hurting Mohan. So she started writing with a false name Seeta; the chosen name quite symbolic of her conformist and conventional attitude.

The internalization of patriarchal violence for centuries is the reason why most women are unable to escape and condone some forms of physical, emotional and psychological abuse. They suffer from a depleted sense of self-esteem. They feel disempowered and it has its roots in childhood conditioning. These women never would have possibly spoken their minds or rebelled during their childhood. Like Jaya, who as child always wanted to listen to Radio Ceylon but could not because her father would always tell her, "What poor taste you have, Jaya" (3) and "The shame I had felt then survived long" (3). She could never protest against her father and she could "never dare to confess" to Mohan how much she enjoyed the ads amidst movies. The problem was she saw her father's image in her husband and never wanted to rebel. So after the father it is the husband who dominates her, unknowingly, right from the beginning of the relationship.

Moreover, the fear of losing their sense of security and the of uncertainty make women like Jaya get addicted to abuse. The innate fear of abandonment in Jaya does not allow her to do Ckeer own decisions, the fear still prevails in the subconscious mind. With a smothering relationship with Mohan Jaya has misguided sense of destiny. She compares herself to Gandhan "who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly" (61).

It is when Mohan leaves her alone and goes off because he was under some investigation for his unethical businesses, Jay ponders over the agony behind being an unquestioning and dutiful wife and a failed

writer. Jaya is compelled to look at the purpose of her life, her existence. She cites the example of Maitreyee, the profound sage Yajnavalkya's wife. Maitreyee is symbolic in her quest for her true identity, her true self. When Yajnavalkya renounced the worldly life and on his way to the forest asked his wife Maitreyee whether she would like to stay back taking care of their worldly possessions. Maitreyee promptly responded that she has nothing to do with something that is destructible. She wanted to know the efficacy of that which is immortality and thus she left with her husband to seek the higher truth, her own self and identity.

Like Maitreyee, Jaya wanted to find herself, seek her space and independence from all the drudgery. She was trying to discover the parameters of patriarchy and the possibilities of resistance. She was now negotiating and questioning her seemingly powerless position with that of a structured patriarchal power. When her identity and individuality is threatened, she decides to break her silence. She stifles under the weight of her own silence which almost destroys her creativity thus shattering her own space and identity. When her own space is threatened, she decides to break her silence by doing what she liked most- writing. She takes recourse in the Bhagavad Gita where the final words of Krishna's long sermon to Arjuna [was]: "Do as you desire" Yathechhasi tatha kuru (192).

Unlike the Western feminist works, Deshpande does not surrender to an aggressive individualism and a very liberal feminism. Her characters move in a traditional set up but are not tied down by a ritualistic orthodoxy. They search for an identity, they yearn for their freedom, yet they are firmly rooted their culture. As Adele King writes, they are "aware of the e the power-behind-the throne' often held by European wives, eth a woman can have in a traditional marriage.... This is r rather an inner certainty gained from willingly accepting a dermined fate" (1990: 160-61). Similarly, A.N. Dwivedi in his article reads silence as a metaphor of communication between Java and her husband; a kind of metacommunication. Though sinterpretation of silence is different from the lines of the Western feminism, nevertheless he tries to explore the ethos and essence of Indian concept of women empowerment.

Jaya as a writer frees herself from the colonizing male voice that had transmitted a manipulated vision of her identity and engages in the process of filling the blank pages of her own story, always silenced and ignored. As a result, the fact of becoming the subject of her own narrations (articulated and structured from her own voice) has given her the strength to chronicle and proclaim her real self. Trinh T Minh-ha, thus, comments: "In trying to tell something, a woman is told, shredding herself into opaque words while her voice dissolves on

the walls of silence. Writing is a commitment of language. The web of her gestures, like all modes of writing, denotes a historical solidarity (on the understanding that her story remains inseparable from history)" (246).

By delving deep into her psychic core, she finds that the self she seeks to define is not merely an individual self, but a collective one. The power, the permission, the authority to tell stories about herself and other women comes from her cultural community. This community includes the historical experience of oppression as well as a feminine literary tradition.

The fear of failing back Jaya from writing. It was not to get rid of. She could attain her true independence only Mohan alone who she had to fight, it was her own fear that she when mind would be free from fear. She confesses, "I hadn't stopped writing because of Mohan; I could not make Mohan the scapegoat for my failures, for I had written even after that confrontation with him- stories that had been rejected, stories that had come back to me, stories that I had hidden here in th house" (145). "...My failures. Of course, Mohan had no to do with these. He didn't even know I'd written them" (146).

It was Kamat who recognized the potentialities of Jaya, e fear, her apprehension and her yearning for freedom. He, in sense, encouraged her to overcome her uncertainties, becom more self-aware of her strengths and weaknesses and beco more confident in her own unique qualities. Like a pupa we has to undergo a metamorphosis before the final incarnation Jaya undergoes a "crisis" in which she is forced to addres key questions about the purpose of her life, her values, e ideals, her achievements. Jaya deliberately uses the pen name "Seeta' as an attempt to hide her originality so that her worke are published without much controversy and she also escapes possible consequences of falling into the trap of allegedly writing about someone who would resemble Mohan, or his aunt or h mother. It was when Kamat warns her, "beware of this 'wome are the victims' theory of yours. It'll drag you down into a soft squishy bog of self-pity. Take yourself seriously, woman. Don't skulk behind a false name. And work-work if you want other to take you seriously. This scribbling now and then..." (148) won't help her much.

In his book Writing and Identity, Roz Ivanic writes that the act of writing is not just about conveying 'content' but also about the representation of self. That is the reason why most people find writing difficult because they do not feel comfortable with the 'me' they are portraying in their writing. Jaya is scared to write her own story-"Self-revelation is a cruel process" she confesses. "The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges (1).

Through a process of self-reflection and self-definition, partially initiated by Kamat, Jaya ultimately arrives at at integrated, coherent sense of her identity. Pragati Sobti, therefore, mentions: "The novelist tries to establish that is not only the patriarchal set up which is responsible for silencing the women. The responsibility also lies within the victim to refuse, to raise a voice and to break that silence. The novel traces the growth of the protagonist from a state of weakness, feeling of failure to that of relaxation. She accomplishes this through self- assessment and self-criticism."

She reveals her experiences from the point of view of the narrator, from a perspective that comes from closeness and knowledge of the situation. She thus recovers the narrative voice that she had been denied by her male counterparts for the maintenance of the patriarchal structure of the community. She abandons the "margins" of her story to take a central position in the development of her new life, in which she fights to renegotiate her space within her community as well as to re-educate its members into a more tolerant, integrative understanding of life.

Writing is considered a valid procedure of publication of the identity, and it is for this reason that many Indian women writers chronicle stories in which women narrate other women's stories. Deshpande, thus, writes in a genre in which protagonists that are in conflict with the idea of having to show their real selves, choose to transmit it by means of creative devices, a fact that Annie O. Eysturoy defines in the following terms: "The intimate connection between the quest for self-development, a sine qua non of the female Bildungsroman, and the concept of creativity as a catalyst for self-discovery is the basic theme of many female writers" (1996: 21). Both the writer of the novel and her protagonist adopt the creative process as the most appropriate so as to express the outcome of the search for their identity. It represents a way of liberating oneself and opening up to the rest of the society, and in a defensive way, protecting them behind the shelter of a fictitious character, who vindicates all that they want to fight for.

Louise Sundararajan, a psychologist at the Rochester Psychiatric Center in New York, for example, talks about the therapeutic benefits of expressive writing. She says, "Writing is processing", and suggests that by "spilling out their guts people can be on the road to recovery. Writing is a successful therapy because it addresses both components of mental processing. One component is when you write, you spell things out. You say how much you hate it, or love it, and you use all the feeling words youcan think of. But there's another kind of processing, and the two have to go hand in hand. You restructure the whole thing. You take a step back, you

look at it, you reflect on the whole thing That's very important. That's a psychological distance you have to keep. You need to do both", adds Sundararajan in her blog.

By penning her story, Jaya has achieved articulation of her predicament, her constraints, her anguish and has thereby broken her silence. Secondly, the process of reflection during the course of articulation has given her an important insight: she realizes that fragmentation of the self is not possible. Earlier she had cut off the bits of her that had refused to be Mohan's wife she had denied certain parts of her self. But now she decides to live "whole," retaining all that did not fit in the straitjacket of "wifehood". She had decided not to look for clues in Mohan's face and then give "him the answer I know he wants". This decision fills her with vigour and buoyancy and the novel ends on the affirmative note of hope as against frustration and despair with which it had begun. She concludes: "life has always to be made possible" (193). As Adele King writes, "Deshpande's strength lies in portraying the uncertainties and doubts of women who cannot see themselves as heroic, but who want to make life 'possible'"" (1990: 167).

The silence imposed on her kept her from breaking down the barriers that denied herself her own voice, and which forced her to assimilate and perpetuate the colonized depictions of her identity. But as the novel, along with Jaya's renegotiation and valorisation of her identity develops, writing becomes the axis of this (r)evolutionary process.

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