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Revisiting Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* in Post-Truth Times

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ABSTRACT: Shashi Deshpande in her celebrated novel, *That Long Silence*, undermines the patriarchal norms and values that control Indian middle class housewife, that a confining rigid code of conduct for women does not permit them a space to realize their potential. In today's fast changing world, the old traditions and socio-cultural systems are challenged. Interestingly, the current reality of our life is strange, chaotic and without a particular referential point. Post-Truth is a significant part of postmodernism, which highlights how misrepresentation of reality enters in fictional literature. It is author's predictions to employ a narrator's voice for bringing home to her readers her philosophy of life. S/he can influence opinions through suspension of disbelief, and rather make the reader accept lies as truths. The present paper aims to explore the Post-Truth elements in the narrative, meaning thereby the critical insight into the protagonist's idea of self-fulfillment and self identity, and also the truth of the matter in gender relations and hegemonic power structures.

KEYWORDS: Post-Truth, gender, hegemony, patriarchy, misrepresentation, postmodernism.

'If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy - the weight of that long silence of one-half the world' (Elizabeth Robins, in *a speech to the WWSL*, 1907).

Shashi Deshpande is obviously indebted to Elizabeth Robins for the title *That Long Silence* for her 1988 novel that established her reputation as a celebrity fiction writer. She duly acknowledged her indebtedness by selecting the quote as the epigraph of the novel. Hence, her thematic concerns centers on Feminist agenda in this novel. But the deeper understanding of the text informs about larger issues in real life. For instance, following feministic ideological concerns, the author questions the hegemonic power structure and predominance of male's interests. But its reader is not convinced to buy the argument given by her. Fiction can be full of lies in order to present some idea and message to its readers. A knowledgeable reader aims at exploring the objective facts and opinionated presentation of the same by the narrative voices to influence its understanding.

Post-Truth is dishonesty and infidelity, of which the agent may escape being held guilty; rather he may get felicitated as intelligent for his endeavour to search truth. For truth is an undiscovered error, and it is nothing but humane to discover and rediscover it. In Post-Truth reading of the text, the speculative tools comprise the reader oriented approach, the message, factual truth and its manipulations, which are also hallmark of postmodernism in which the plurality of viewpoints and free-floating signs create confusion in conceptually comprehending the values and objective reality. In Postmodernism, there is a celebration of

chaos, fragmentation, and commoditization, cannibalization of loss, hyperreality and simulacra. In Post-Truth, reality is replaced by hyperreality, or by distorted reality; it may hide reality. As Baudrillard in his book *Simulation* argues that sign may refer to reality, or distort reality, or disguise reality, or appear to have no relation with reality. The post-truth literature creates hyperreality through the images that dominate normal relationships so that they are turned on their head. The truth is arbitrary and can appear differently depending upon the viewer's perspective and ideological standpoints. A writer may take up one aspect of reality or personal interpretation of the same to form readers' opinions. A reader is not so much influenced by dry truth as he is by presenting sensitive imaginative characters involved in emotional turmoil and struggling to find solutions for his problems. There is no denying the fact that history is required to present objective truth, while fictional literature aims at how things should have been. Importantly, history itself is opinionated. The dominant sovereignty or the ideological predilections of the historian happen to write fabricated stories on factual truth. It is significant to point out that various interpretations and explanations are, in fact, Post-Truth representation of the original facts. If an incident/text is approached through different perspectives, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis feminism, formalism, structuralism, deconstruction, historicism, biographical study, the new interpretations emerge to enlighten the world; which is nothing but the Post-Truth representation of facts. In short, Post-Truth is a tool of Deconstructionism, and it is operative in human world since human mind started its trajectory into knowledge and power.

That Shashi Deshpande undertakes to make a public opinion in favour of honest writing and woman liberation makes a case in Post-Truth understanding of the game of power in relationships. Her heroine Jaya grapples with repression, suppression, marginalization, failure and frustration in husband and children, and marital disharmony. Personal choices, plans and actions to achieve personal goals become of primary importance to her. But she believes in the institution of family and marriage. Owing to her *sanskaras*, she/Jaya supports social structures and does not break them like a radical Feminist. The objective of the present paper is to explore the narrative in Post-Truth terms.

However, Post-Truth is a postmodern terminology in which gender relations can be interpreted through feminisms, social and cultural studies. Jaya's crunch situation is partly personal partly familial. Jaya wants to articulate the problematic relationship with Mohan regarding conflicting tastes, attitudinal differences in matter of sexual gratification, different perspectives on issues of gender roles in given socio-cultural setup, and questions of financial security of their household. She can speak up for herself through a therapeutic kind of writing in an autobiographical narrative, which, as a matter of fact, is a massive challenge; and she emerges victorious in her adventure. After all her name Jaya, meaning victory, has been carefully chosen by her father, who not only affectionately loved her but also had big plans for her to grow up into a well-cultured person with classic tastes and refinement. How does she finally defies the suffocating rigid constraints of patriarchal structures informs the text of the novel. Primarily, she has by and large depended on woman's proximity and self-experience with her own body, that can better be validated by Helen Cixous's assertion: "More so than men who are coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation, women are body"(Cixous, 886). It implies that men may have sublimated sexuality for other goals, but women have not distanced from body. Consequently, a woman writer, who aims at exploring the problematic masculine attitude and response toward the sexuality located in body of woman, records sensational representation of gender differences. On the contrary, men have sublimated their sexual desires by transforming them into non-sexual ones, as Freud counts them that "sublimation is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic, or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life"(Freud, 97). Jaya recollects her frustrated hopes and unfulfilled sensual life.

Sensual memories are the coldest. They stir up nothing in you. As I thought of those days, of my feelings, and then looked at the man lying beside me, nothing stirred in me. Those emotions and responses seem to belong to two other people, not to the two of us lying here together.

In any case, whatever my feelings had been then, I had never spoken of them to him. In fact, we had never spoken of sex at all. It had been as if the experience was erased each time after it happened; it never existed in words. The only words between us had been his question, 'Did I hurt you?' and my answer, 'No.' Each time, after it was over, the same question; and my reply too, invariably the same -- 'No'(95).

Mohan lags far behind in comprehending female desire and its manifestations in body as pleasant pain or painful pleasure, because both woman and life express gratitude and faithfulness to the male who shakes them like a thunderstorm. It may sound strange and unpalatable to a Feminist; however, as a matter of fact it's not a cultural problem, it is rather a psycho-biological necessity of female sexuality. Jaya is waiting for perfect moments of love-making, but neither of them discusses sex and orgasm. The act is monotonous in their normal routine. Jaya shares with readers her really critical feelings about sex, "We had never come together, only our bodies had done that. I had begun to cry then, despairing, silently, scared that I would wake Mohan up, trying desperately to calm myself"(98). She has been once busy in keeping alive the romance in her marriage by observing all the edicts that women's magazines laid down. After a sort of realization of the futility of such endeavour, she confesses, "But sex becomes, in the final count, to a great extraneous. If my feelings for him had had their beginning in the act of sex, they had grown, like some monster child way beyond it"(96). Jaya is desperately hungry for emotional support through communicating. She is frightened to be alone.

There is another male, Kamat, whom Jaya befriends, and who initiates her journey in realizing her potential of a serious writer, and, first, she has to stop writing frivolous Seeta column. Kamat has sublimated his desires, transformed them into non-sexual pursuit, and lived a lonely life. His loneliness starts frightening him and he survives a minor heart attack. Finally, in presence of Jaya, he suffered a major attack and tried to reach Jaya, who thought it otherwise and ran away from the room. He died; the news reached her late. She recollects, "I knew it now. 'Jaya,' he had said, and I had run away. He tried to reach out to me in his loneliness and it had frightened me. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought, I'm only Mohan's wife, and I had run away"(186). She even expresses her support for moral policing when she sees a girl with two boys at bus stop. Her *sanskars* are typical of a middle class Indian family. Jaya obviously confirms dissatisfaction in sensual matters within institution of marriage, but importantly she doesn't do anything to alleviate her desperate condition, because she is, in fact, confined in those very systems of patriarchy which she undertakes to defy in her so called free expression in writing. She strongly disapproves her connection with mythical women, who support patriarchal norms and values. Still she holds fast to norm of faithfulness toward her husband. The sensational disclosure of unsatisfied sexuality seems to be a distorted fact devised to draw power and upper hand upon Mohan. Because such a discovery for him would be not only treacherously illusionary but also trash. This is an ignoble allegation that can shatter his ego. But this is from where a woman can draw power. Jaya manipulates facts only to achieve her goal of writing what matters to her by making Mohan guilty and insufficient so that he may lose power or moral right to check her. This is how Post-Truth representation of power struggle between husband and wife gets foregrounded in the narrative.

Mohan, her husband, is ridiculously interested in making extra money so as to give his family an affluent lifestyle. Jaya thinks differently; and she reacts sharply at the disclosure of some shady deal at his office in which he was implicated and required to face inquiry. She retorts back that she never wanted Mohan to provide a luxurious life with bribes and she is not to share his malpractice. Herein she sounds like the wife

of Valmiki, a dakait, who was asked by one of the *Saptarishis* to enquire if she was ready to share his sins, which she denied and contrarily told him her right in taking half of his good deeds as per the scripture. Though it is a husband's duty to provide for the family, it doesn't indicate to earn through wrong means. Ironically, Jaya seems to follow Indian social systems and structures, but apparently says she has nothing to do with these mythical figures. This is Post-Truth discovery of personal preferences. Deshpande presents a serious analysis of institution of family and marriage, priority of male issue, psychology of self revelation, guilt and bereavement. Jaya does not believe in patriarchal notion of husband and wife as "two bullocks yoked together"(191) and that "a husband is like a sheltering tree"(32). She stands by Kusum when the latter was deserted by her husband because she couldn't give birth to a son; and she shelters her in her flat despite Mohan's objections. She reinforces her opinion on reader with conviction by presenting facts in altogether different perspectives.

What she cannot communicate writes or plans to write labeling as true and serious affair, and a way toward self fulfillment. In fact, her silence is not caused by her non-intellectual and callous husband. It is rather part of her personality that was shaped in her formative years. Her father, Appa, has socialized her differently, as he emphasizes, "'You are not like the others, Jaya, 'and 'you are going to be different from the others, Jaya'(136). In the beginning, when she was a young girl, she passionately liked to listen to romantic duets from films broadcast from Radio Ceylon, which her father despised as addiction. In addition she loves to watch ads because the "cozy, smiling, happy families in their gleaming homes spelt sheer poetry to me. For me, they were the fairy tales in which people 'live happily ever after'"(03). But Mohan may make fun of her if she tells him her views about ads. She was suppressed long ago by her father, who stood for cultural refinement and classic tastes. Jaya shares as follows,

He had tried his best to wean me from the habit, to make me love Pluskar and Faiyaz Khan instead of Rafi and Lata; but he had failed.

'What poor taste you have, Jaya,' I can remember him saying to me once.

The shame I had felt then survived long. 'There's no need to hurry,' Mohan often said when we were getting ready to go to a movie. 'At the worst, we'll miss the ads, and who wants to see them anyway?'

I did, but I never dared to confess it to him(03).

It is evident from the above quote that her tastes are feminine, which are common and cheap in male's point of view. Her father's depreciating comment takes the form of repression; as a result she turns within and cannot speak her mind. However, her inner father is positive and gives her strength for self evaluation and self interrogation; she undertakes this soul searching process acquires self revelation. She is, throughout the narrative, entangled in labyrinth of follies and foibles of all around in her environment including herself; and ultimately finds solutions from her own father,

'Yathechasi tatha kuru' -- I had seen the Sanskrit words in Appa's diary after his death and, curious to know what they meant and why Appa had written them down as if they meant something to him, I had asked Ramukaka about that line... who told me the line was from the *Bhagwadgita*. The final words of Krishan's long sermon to Arjuna. 'Do as you desire.' I'd thought it something of a cheat. Imagine the Lord, any Master telling his disciple ... 'Do as you desire!' What are Prophets and Masters for if not to tell you what to do? But now I understand. With this line, after all those millions of words of instruction, Krishna confers humanness on Arjuna. 'I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire'"(192).

Thus, herein lies the beauty and rationale of *Sanatana Dharma*. Having shown all the possible ways, toward salvation or deliverance, Master leaves the choice to free human will. Consequent upon the choice, only the chooser will be held responsible and accountable thereto. Master/God is nowhere to account for the consequences of *Karma*. It is entirely human affair. No other religion or *Dharma* or sect or path seems to give this much freedom to its followers. The protagonist, Jaya has discovered the solution to her problems in the sermon. Importantly, the problem is that Western mind has mixed up fact, reality and truth. The world itself is a lie or in abstract terms a dream in which nothing is fixed. But there are essential values and works that support and sustain the ephemeral dream, which can be called truth for instance, the concept of *Satyam, Shivam, Sunderam*; and *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. There may be no Post-Truth about them. Still such truths can be misrepresented. However, it is not only interesting but also pertinent to point out that one meaning of *Shiva* is 'that is not' or 'that doesn't exist,' meaning thereby truth equally doesn't exist. Post-Truth is by and large associated with political ideologues to eke out power out of distorted and disguised *factual truths*. Similarly, in real world as well as in fictional world, an individual may achieve its goals by exploiting relationships through employing this tool. At present, it is relevant to maintain that whatever an individual does creates *Karmic* bondage; of which the Master, though having shown the different paths and mode of actions, ruthlessly declares to his loving disciple that the choice and resultant fruit of action will be only his lot; the former has neither responsibility nor accountability for the same. The Master is, like a saint, cruel enough to love none, which enables him to love all. Whereas the agent of Post-Truth may exploit, having belief in the saying, 'A friend to all is a friend to none.' The seeker may be nefarious or genuine. To say squarely, what might better be left for reading between the lines is that herein the reader comes to recognize its preference and mindset. In this narrative, Jaya seems to be in search of fulfillment, like a saint, like Arjuna, as she has her own microcosm *Mahabharata*.

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