

Female Quest for Identity in Shashi Deshpande's Novel: That Long Silence

M.N Rajani

Asst. Prof., GFGC. Dept. of English, Madikeri

Novels of Shashi Deshpande abound in female quest for identity. Her novels are usually narrated by female protagonists who strive to find out their own selves throughout the novels. Her heroines try to find out their identity through writing and ultimately reach a resolution in their lives. They are haunted by memories of past and feel a kind of worthlessness, but towards the end they realize their selves. This is one of the important needs and messages in today's world where women are facing a void, vacuum in their lives. Though they appear to be successful outwardly, but they seem to lack direction and feel a sense of futility. Shashi Deshpande's novels fit into such a scenario and help women realize their potential in a positive manner. The quest for female identity has its roots in the patriarchal setup, where man is given every kind of freedom.

The female protagonist Jaya in the novel 'That long Silence' like any other educated middle class woman restrains herself to the rules and constraints of the society. She is unable to find out where she lives for herself or for her family. When taken for granted she feels the quest for searching her identity. She is a typical house wife with love and affection for her husband, children and has respect and sense of duty for her in-laws.

Being husband and wife she shares her intimate relation with Mohan, but she is unable to relate herself with him in terms of feelings. Her silence is that typical silence, which is felt by any woman in society. Her introspection and memories are a part of every woman's life. Though she tries to establish her identity as a writer, she is suppressed by her husband. Finally she is not satisfied with her life and lacks courage to revolt.

Moreover she loses her identity when her name is changed from Jaya to Suhasini. She feels a kind of stagnation when she recalls that her which seemed so busy was nothing but a worthless pursuit.

G. Lakshmi Narasaiah ingeniously discovers the existential theme in the novel –

“Jaya speaks not like a women liberated from the burdens of either her humanity or her womanhood but a woman redefining her existential situation in her own terms, having it out on her own premises” [1]

Shashi Deshpande uses the first person narrative to unfold the mute tale of Jaya. In order to reveal herself, she alienates herself from her real self that is veiled under the taciturn attitude of Jaya.

Jaya, born in a liberal family was named Jaya which means victory. Her father expected her to be bold, but she can recall how her desires and feelings were suppressed by her own father, when Jaya loved film music, her father wanted her to practice classical music. It was the first blow to her identity. Deflated she experienced a loss of self and began to keep her feelings and emotions confined to her. The pent-up feelings started rushing to find a vent. She felt her marriage lacked the cream. In the novel she says she is like Gandhari, who blind folded herself to share the blindness of her husband. She felt she lost herself during the process of pleasing Mohan. The name 'Jaya' given by her father lead to conflict when

Mohan did not wanted Jaya but a woman who would serve him, support him and act as directed by him.

M. Rajeshwar Mittapalli says-

“The exercise helps her above anything else; to come to grips with reality as it presents itself. It is in this context that the stream of consciousness technique adopted in the novel is artistically most gratifying. Jayas's unfolding of her story in bits and pieces moving back and forth with remarkable felicity, borders on the incoherent, necessitating the stream of consciousness technique” [2]

That long silence is not an imaginary story. It is a story that happens in every middle class and educated Indian woman's life.

Like the chorus of Greek drama, they were distanced from suffering. For them, there was just living-one foot in front of another, one foot in front of another until death came to them in a natural form.

The day they got married Jaya felt that they were like a pair of bullocks yoked together. But how long do the bullocks yoke together is the question!

Probably Jaya questioned, if she needed an identity her likes and dislikes. She would not have a say because she says at one point that Mohan always had a clear idea of what he wanted, the kind of life he wanted to lead and I just went along with him. Jaya gets reminded of Maitrayee, who definitely rejected her philosopher husband Yajnavalkaya's offer of half of his property. Maitrayee preferred immortality to property.

This clearly illustrates Jaya's frustration within herself. Jaya at a later point of time remembers Vanita mami's confessional advice given to her just before her wedding.

If your husband has a mistress or two ignore it, take up a hobby instead, cats may be, or your sister's children.

Jaya wonders for a minute if she would also be advised in her turn. I wonder if men are given such advices.

According to the author Indian husbands take it for granted their wives emotions, likes and dislikes to be same like them and here the author reciprocates the emotions in vivid detail. The husband never realizes where he lacks and the agony behind his wife's destined roles.

Through Jaya the author expresses her lifestyle, her role clarity, is she living for her or for someone else?

Jaya's life comes apart at the seams when her husband is asked to leave his job while allegations of business malpractice against him are investigated. Their future as a family is jeopardy. Jaya, a failed writer is haunted by memories of the past.

Through her quest Jaya decided to change herself and hoped for a change in Mohan who had written a telegram to announce his arrival.

Rajeswarisunder Rajan:-

“Deshpande's protagonist breaks her silence at one level through the act of writing itself, at another level through renegotiating inter personal relations within the family”[3]

On the one hand the novel teaches women to fight the silence and express themselves and on other it gives a message to the men folk to try and understand women in a better way.

S.P Swain analyses the novel in terms of the articulation of the feminine voice: “The feminist struggle for liberation is looked upon within the frame work of the freedom crisis. The quest for an authentic selfhood on the part of the protagonist finds an artistic expression through the heroine's rebellion against patriarchal core of society”. [4]

END NOTES

- [1] G. lakshmi Narasaiah“Life inside the cage: Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence, The Indian Novel with a social purpose, Ed, K. Venkata Reddy and P. Bayapa Reddy, N. Delhi, Atlantic Publishers, 1999, P. 136.
- [2] Rajeshwar Mittapalli, “The Trauma of a Housewife: Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence”A Critical Spectrum Ed. T.M.J. Indra Mohan, N. Delhi, Atlantic Publishers, 2004.
- [3] Rajeswarisunder Rajan, “The Feminist Plot and the Nationalist Allegory: Home and World in Two Indian Women Novels in English”, Modern Fiction Studies 1993.
- [4] S.P Swain, “Feminism in Shashi Deshpande's novels”, Contemporary Indian Writing in English: Critical Perceptions Ed. N.D.R Chandra II, N. Delhi, Sarup and Sons, 2005,P 129.