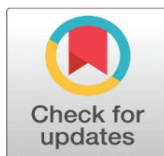
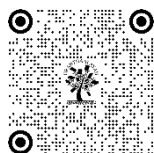


QUEST FOR SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC IDENTITIES OF WOMEN IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THAT LONG SILENCE

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ABSTRACT

The important step to women's emancipation is the financial independence of women. The novel *That Long Silence* shows the need to have one's income confined to both this elite class of women as well as women of lower class who do not have the opportunity to learn and educate themselves. The protagonist, Jaya could earn both fame and money by her regular column called "Seeta". Maid servant Jeeja earns money and maintains her family when her husband gets remarried to another woman as she is barren. She is a thorough professional and dignity of labour. She feels proud of her work and manages to earn more than the other maids because of her "reputation of reliability". Financial independence on women's amelioration really helps to free them from their total dependence syndrome to a certain extent for achieving their goal in quest for Social, Political and the Economic identities

Keywords: Swarming, Celibacy, Subjugation, Desolate, Shackles, Anguish.

Shashi Deshpande's writing is realistic in the sense that she writes about real life as opposed to romantic or escapist writing. She is one of the foremost Indian English novelists and the winner of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *That Long Silence*. Her writings, present a realistic image of woman. She emphasizes on the importance of being self-independent and reflects it through her women protagonists. Deshpande's novels deal with the growth and development of women characters who make conscious efforts that ultimately lead them to attain selfhood and identity, making a new beginning in their lives. Her writings are appreciated and read both at home and abroad. She draws her characters from the culture and society which she had known very intimately. Her way of presenting the real life of women in general and the educated, modern, middle – class women in particular through her novels is exceptional.

She successfully makes an attempt to explore the inner 'psyche' of those modern women who are at the crossroads between tradition and modernity. Her novel is also about the dilemma of educated women who are struggling between the age-old traditional values, inflicted on them right from their childhood and the modern outlook they recently

acquired from their education. The problem of those educated women is their inability to discard traditional values at once and follow their newly acquired values. The protagonists of her novels are ordinary women caught in certain situations that make them view and review their past life. They realize that they suffer because they let themselves to be so. Instead of blaming themselves they blame the society, and the patriarchal culture for their lot. In the process of struggling they are able to hold the ruins of their life. They came to know who they were, what they wanted and most importantly how to get them. At last, the protagonists have a vision of heading for a new beginning which is far better and more secure than before as they are no longer fearsome and dependent.

Deshpande's protagonists are well aware of the exploitation of women at various levels: social, moral, cultural and religious. They strongly condemn the oppressive system of patriarchal society, the culture of male supremacy in every household. The society too has different scales for men and women. For instance, a married man can keep a mistress and can have more than one wife but the same society condemns the same thing if a woman does it. Society only expects a woman to be an obedient daughter, loving and dutiful wife and caring mother and provides no room for personal growth and development. Women need to fulfil their hopes and aspirations like men. The important step to women's emancipation is the financial independence of women. Economic independence works positively as a means towards women's emancipation in some cases but the deeply rooted culture and tradition of Indian society overshadows the light of economic independence. For instance, if the wife happens to earn more than the husband and then both of them suffer as it is against the scale of the society.

Problems and predicaments faced by women in *That Long Silence* are in four different ways: common problems shared by all sections of women, irrespective of difference in caste, class or creed, binding them together under the same umbrella of having been born women; the second being the peculiar problems faced by the educated working class women; the third being the problems faced by lower class; illiterate women; and the last could be the individual problems faced by various women. Importance given to the male members of the family in our society can be seen in Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*, Jaya, the protagonist remembered how her mother's love, affection and care, were 'swarming' over her brother but not giving much attention to her. There is still no end of women's problems even if girls grow up and get married. It is generally the women who have to adjust and sacrifice many things even after marriage, sometimes their names and career, to be accepted, loved and admired by their husbands and in-laws. It is very common in Indian society changing of one's name after marriage as per the wishes of one's husband and in-laws. In *That Long Silence*, the protagonist's name was changed from 'Jaya' given to her by her father at the time of her birth, to 'Suhashini' given by her husband at the time of her marriage. There is a drastic change in almost everything including the names and identities between the life before and after marriage for women as if marriage is a second birth for them.

Women have been taught that "a husband is like a sheltering tree" even if he is a drunkard and has mistress, he must be worshipped like god because without him, they would be dangerously unprotected and vulnerable. In *That Long Silence* Mohan's mother waited for her drunken husband however late he was. She again had to cook rice for him because her husband wanted his rice "fresh and hot". She waited for so long hoping that he would come soon before the rice got cold. It was unthinkable to light the fire again. Her husband came after a long wait, and complained that there was no 'fresh chutney'. He picked up his heavy brass plate and threw it at the wall, and walked out of the house. Two of her older children woke up by the noise but she told them to sleep, saying it was nothing. She sent her boy to the next-door neighbour to ask for some chilies. She lighted the fire again with the wood that was difficult to burn. Her eyes were red with the smoke and meanwhile her baby woke up and cried. She hushed the baby by feeding.

Everyday, millions of women face such problem in Indian society. Suffering, silence and surrender are part of life of higher middle-class women, no matter how educated they are. It is a testimony to the long suppression of women in patriarchal society. The common fate of women is unalterable whether it is she or her mother everything is the same. The root of everything lies in the lack of an independent life of women even for a space to move and act. All classes of women suffer because of all those expectations, impositions and constructed images created by patriarchy. The celibacy of widows is another hindrance in the way of women's emancipation.

The harsh reality faced by the widows are: they have to shave off their heads, wear worn out, old colourless saris, have no possessions and confine themselves in old, shabby rooms. They are made to live a secluded and cut-off life from the society. On the other hand, for a widower, everyone – friends, family, relatives – will join hands to search for a new wife

as soon as possible. Another cause of concern and anxiety in the life of women in a society where motherhood is idealized to a great extent is barrenness. Childless women are looked down upon and treated like sinners and considered as incomplete women. Not only the painful and insecure life of childless women but women of all classes also face the problem of unwanted sex and unwanted pregnancies. Women get themselves aborted and are scorned by the society. The general assumption is that women are childbearing machines. Unfortunately repeated pregnancies make them weak and unhealthy. Aborting was considered shameful and treated as a sin or a taboo. Monya, Jaya's sister-in-law in *That Long Silence* narrated to Jaya how her mother had died a week after she got aborted and how people reacted to it. Jaya gets herself aborted to avoid unwanted pregnancy. Later on, she feels guilty at heart but no regrets at all. Such kind of feelings are quite normal on the part of the mother.

One of the important aspects of marriage that affects the lives of most women is to give up their hopes and aspirations as soon as they get married. For instance, Jaya, in *That Long Silence* lost her vitality to write when her husband confronted her over an article she had written that won a prize in a contest. Afterwards, she could never write her mind and hence became a failure. Her husband unreasonably charged her by saying how she could reveal them to the world in that way, thinking that the man and the woman in the story were two of them. This shows that a social institution like marriage has turned out to be a barrier in women's life in tradition bound society of India. Women's role in a patriarchal society is reduced to the role of an obedient daughter, a dutiful wife, a loving and caring mother but in this process she has to sacrifice her individuality.

Modern educated woman like Jaya is well aware of her place in the patriarchal society and hence she cannot freely exercise her independent mind and spirit. Like her all educated women are often frustrated as they seem to see wide difference between what they had been taught and trained in a traditional society and the modern outlook they acquire from their education. Mostly lower class women are illiterate and traditional in their outlook. The burden of the family like bringing up their children, maintaining and marrying off their daughters are taken by them. Though illiterate they do take all the responsibilities of their family as their husbands are irresponsible and drunkards. They can easily submit all their sufferings and misfortunes to their fate.

Being born as a woman means to accept shackles much to the disadvantage of the woman but then being born in the lower class might mean to have double disadvantage for women. Generally our society neglects lower class woman. For instance, in *That Long Silence*, Jeeja needed Jaya to make the doctor look after her son better. She requested Jaya in the following words: "If you speak to the doctor there, they will look after him better; they will give him special care. Otherwise no one cares, no one is bothered about poor patients, they won't even tell us anything if we ask them they bark at us as if we're dogs". [Deshpande, Shashi. *That Long Silence*: 160]

Most of these women suffer because they attach too much to the value of wifehood and motherhood. Jeeja suffered silently when her husband left her to marry another woman. She shared her sufferings with Jaya by saying: "How could I blame him for marrying again when I couldn't give him any children? How could I blame that woman for marrying him? With whom shall I be angry?" [ibid.: 52]. Society considers woman to be worthless if she cannot become a biological mother. The importance of marriage for the lower-class women is not exaggerated through the novel. Jeeja in *That Long Silence* sternly shut up her step daughter-in-law, Tara when the latter wished her drunkard husband dead. Jeeja herself had enough of her suffering but still she attached much value and importance to wifehood. She said to Tara: "Stop that! Don't forget, he keeps the Kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?" [ibid.,: 53]

Most heroines of Deshpande feel the need to earn an income of their own. Though Jaya does not sit idle doing household chores only. She is a columnist and aspiring fiction writer. She could earn both fame and money by her regular column called "Seeta". The need to have one's income can confine to both this elite class of women as well as women of lower class who do not have the opportunity to learn and educate themselves. Maid servant Jeeja in *That Long Silence* earns money and maintains her family when her husband gets remarried to another woman as she is barren. She is a thorough professional and keeps dignity of labour. She feels proud of her work and manages to earn more than the other maids because of her "reputation of reliability" [ibid.,: 51]. All women characters who belong to both middle and lower classes are striving to support themselves financially. By doing so it does improve their condition, position and status in and outside the family. Some of them are able to find happiness and job satisfaction in the process of their striving as well.

In a family, mother is at the centre and father is at the periphery. Therefore, the life of the children revolves around their mother. Mother is like a goddess – an immortal source of love, affection, sacrifice, learning, values and everything. She often tears between the tender world of children and the complex and course world of an adult. Father is the symbol of authority conveniently detached and intervenes to keep order and discipline. In *That Long Silence*, the mother is again the arch rival in the filial power structure. Jaya has a story of relationship with her Ai who, like other traditional Indian mothers, showers her affection upon her son while neglecting her daughter. Her mother's discriminatory treatment and sexist bias are resented by Jaya. She writes disparagingly of "Ai's laughter, gay and girlish, when after she was made desolate by widowhood". [ibid.,: 45-46].

The conflict between a restrictive mother and a progressive daughter is inevitable until and unless there is a balance between traditional demands and modern compulsions and a free flow of communication. The modern time of women's emancipation has pervaded across the world in all spheres of life--social, political, economic and familial, etc. the women novelists between 1890 and 1960 evinced the fact that a woman is an equal partner of man with her equal rights, and not a man's subordinate to carry on the load of tradition under his command. Many Indian women English novelists have raised the question of a woman's place and her identity in Indian patriarchal society. Among those novelists Deshpande is a leading Indian woman novelist in English, who has drawn great critical attention and acclaim by projecting a realistic and sensitive picture of the modern educated Indian woman who, although financially independent, still faces the problem of adjustment between tradition and modernity.

The modern Indian woman is trying to find freedom and Identity in a hesitant and shy revolution. The only word which revolves in many women's life and career is "adjustment". Shashi Deshpande prescribes that the Indian woman has to seek her solace in her conventional family values, which need some repair, not a revolution. She needs some repair not a revolution. Many women characters are presented by Deshpande as the victims of the gross gender inequality. Mohan's mother and his sister Vimla, too, are such victims. His mother made a living by cooking for wedding feasts. His father was a drunkard who would frequently beat her up. Vimla's death is also a tragic one as she had developed ovarian tumour and one day bled herself to death in silence.

The quest for identity in the writings of Shashi Deshpande is highly concerned with women's problems and their search for identity. It depends on the emotional, cultural and social stability. The subjugation of women by both cause and system of fundamental imbalance in society is considered by the novelist. Her novel, *That Long Silence* depicts the anguish and conflict between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality and independence for the women on the other. Quest for Identity may be considered as a purposeful awakening of the female protagonist. The protagonist finds it difficult to reconcile between her personal aspirations and her duties towards her family and society. This novel, *That Long Silence* also deals with women's sensibility, their sufferings, their aspirations and their struggle to raise above all the oppressive forces in a male dominated society. Besides, *That Long Silence*, is not prejudicial to males and not biased towards females too. The novelist does not present men as wholly bad and as well as wholly good. In reality a woman has to face numerous difficulties and problems without a husband even if a husband may not be a sheltering tree for a wife. He can be a supporting tree provided by being a man of good character. Above all one should be wise enough to think who is really responsible for the matter.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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