



**SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THAT LONG SILENCE:  
A STUDY IN HUMANISTIC VISION**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Shashi Deshpande has secured prestigious position in post- colonial New English literature. Being a keen observer she observed all burning issues prevailed in the family and society. She has so dexterously dealt with the burning issues regarding women's position in the family and society in her novel "That Long Silence" and this presented novel brought Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990. The soul female character of the novel is Jaya, who decides to break her silence after the seventeen years. She, more than any other woman novelist, is committed and consistent in presenting realistic view of the educated Indian women of the middle class. Definitely the influx of Western education and culture led them to the speculation about their position. They are badly entangled between tradition and modernity. Despite being capable to uplift their status they are considered inferior and subservient to men. It is seen that the suffering is inevitable fate of the woman. Our family and society impose massive burden of the responsibility upon their shoulders without caring their desires, wills, and aspirations. Shashi Deshpande never intends to go against men but in the depiction of reality. She is also called an ardent feminist. Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Kamala Markandaya and others female writers threw adequate light on the role of women in the family and society. More attention is given to the emotional and intellectual conflicts that women encounter in their search for identity. This is highlighted in the various ways by the novelists. Shashi Deshpande depicts women with no voice through her character Jaya in That Long Silence having ambition to be heard. There is, at times, an attempt to come as close as possible to reality by the writers, but nowhere is there an attempt to give voice to the women's innermost feelings or them. Hence, it can't be stated that Pande's novel That Long Silence draws the attention of readers and makes them more curious to know about that silence.*

**Keywords:** andocentric ideologies, monolithic, humanistic, Subaltern

In the present Novel *That Long Silence* Shashi Deshpande has revealed her consensus on marriage, love, mutual understanding, gender discrimination, tradition versus modernity and Marginalization etc. But behind above her attempt is not to get recognition as a feminist or other; instead she advocates humanistic view which shows the equality with little distinction of caste, creed, and class. All are made of flesh and blood and they feel equally so should be



treated equally. Despite having potential and capacity women could not secure equal opportunities and rights, they are pushed back by the andocentric ideologies. That's why they are marginalized. Our patriarchal system places aberration in their way. When women writers come forth to reveal their status they are called stern feminist whereas *feminism* is by no means monolithic term. If it is examined closely, findings show that it is nothing but the critique of the patriarchal modes of thinking which aims at the domination of the male and the subordination of the female. Women are expected to inculcate as a part of socialization. This happens with Jaya, who always thinks to break silence but all preaching instruction of elders never permit her to do that. It will be apt to quote Simone De Beauvoir, who is of the view that history of humanity is a history of systematic attempts to silence the female. She expounds, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine" (*The Second Sex*: 295). The novelist describing the life of Jaya replete with monotony, frustration, alienation, ennui, isolation etc. and asks many questions indirectly. One of them is, whether they should be voiceless, women's only job is to think about their husband's will, comfort, like, dislike, happiness, unhappiness, they are not the think about themselves. As thinking about self carries meaning to them in the society and family. So Shashi Deshpande ventures to explore humanistic view in her novel *That Long Silence*. In an interview to *Geetha Ganghadharn* she says, "My preoccupation is with the interpersonal relationships and human emotions. She expresses that relationship is the most mystifying thing and it is tremendously intriguing fascinating" ( 252).

Shashi Deshpande has so dexterously dealt with the burning issues related to women's position in the family and society in her novel "That Long Silence". She bagged *Sahitya Akadimi Award* for the present novel in 1990. The prime character of the novel is Jaya, who keeps her silence for the seventeen years. Her bringing up never lets her raise her voice against men and patriarchal system. Through this character the novelist delves deep in the heart of the average married women, who are constantly being twisted between patriarchy and imperialism. Gayatri C. Spivak presents her view in her article

*Can the Subaltern Speak?, Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation the figure of the 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.*

After marriage Jaya lives the life in the fragments. Jaya, all time, thinks about her family and Mohan, but constantly misses something. But she does not speculate on what she is missing. She gets, her silence makes her into conformity with Mohan's expectations. In their relationship there is nothing but suppressed silence only.



The novelist through the image of Jaya depicts the crawling one who is unprotected and unshelled. Her condition is woeful as Mohan's wife and Rahul and Rati's mother. She describes, "Distance from real life, scared of writing, scared of failing on God I had thought, I cannot take any more. Even a worm has it can crawl into" (148). When she compares herself to worm which has our shelter, whereas she has not hers. Jaya's above feeling reminds the reader the narrator of Virginia Woolf's fiction *A Room of One's Own*, who presents her demand of a room for her creative work. She does not have any private place where she could think, write and do independently. The narrator believes, with money and a room she could have been a better writer as living condition always affects one's creativity. Jaya wishes to keep on writing. She breaks her silence of the seventeen years in her writing. Along with she can satiate her thrust of craving identity for herself, as far as she writes the responsibilities and social bondage in her view has been a failed writer. Universal voice is not heard in her works. For the pieces of her writing she is answerable to Mohan. It means that she does not have freedom and liberty both in her personal and professional life. In the process of self-revelation through writing, Jaya recognizes her own self. She broods upon her status like who am I? and *what is her position?* She is "An utter stranger, a person so alien that even the faintest understanding of the motives of the motives of her actions seemed impossible" (69). Hence, she comes in ago my, *I can't hope, I can't manage, I can't go on* in such a shifting and suffocating domestic ambience and patriarchal set up, she finds her female identity effaced. Jaya's stories had been rejected for lack of genuine feelings which she had laid aside. In another way it can be described that she is self- alienated. The creative urge and artistic zeal free her from her cramped and dubbed domestic roles. When she realizes, makes her mind to be silent no more, she has right to reveal her genuine feelings and emotions. So, she resolves to break that silence by putting down on paper all that she has suppressed in her seventeen years silence. *That Long Silence* had reduced her into many fragments. She expounds:

*The panic has gone. I am 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 pocket, has been with me through the years. (191)*

Towards the end of the present novel she consciously acknowledges her writing as a kind of fiction and quotes Defoe's description of fiction as a king of lying which may make 'a great hope in the heart'. So she decides to plug that hole 'as said earlier by speaking and listening and erasing the silence between her and Mohan, her erasing of the silence stands for her assertion of her feminine voice, a voice with hope and promise, a voice that articulates her thoughts. The novel does not depict Jaya's life as a totally dismal and hopeless struggle. It suggests "hope" and "change" for the better. She pines for better life where there is no shackle to tie the legs forwarding towards career and success. "We don't change overnight.



It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope without that life would be impossible" (193).

Shashi Deshpande's humanistic vision paves the way for women, who consider themselves inferior to men. They considered that women are safe only in the protection of men. So men as father, brother, husband and son can even dominate them without caring their emotions which is really inhuman. Women's lives do not end with them. Psychologically women are trained to consider men as status symbol. When under pressure and anger Mohan leaves home silently and stealthily with no word to his wife. She does not hear him for a certain time. She is badly jolted by his departure from home. His absence makes her uneasy and she begins to ruminate. She thinks that he has gone for good. Her reputation as a wife is at stake. The thought of carrying children's responsibilities upon her shoulders stirs her; she does not want her to disintegrate. So she is constantly haunted by the thought of incompleteness without Mohan. She considers Mohan as a source of social protection. Such feelings she shares with Mukta:

*A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhat like the one caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising visuals I so loved. But the reality was only this. We were only two persons. A man, Woman. (8)*

Jaya realizes that both are separated. This feeling gives birth to the sense of detachment in Jaya. Both live together but there is little emotional attachment. Before marriage Mohan drifts towards her seeing her proficiency in English. He thinks to marry with her but he never cares her emotions, feelings and desires. She is just like status symbol to her husband. Men as husbands do not take wives worth to stand equally in society and family. Consequently, they humiliate and insult them unknowingly and knowingly too. It will be apt to recount Kiran Desai's protagonist in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* who abuses his wife for her uncivilized behaviour and rebukes her time to time for her inability to speak in English. Whereas she has been source of financial aids to him without that he could not have fulfilled his dream. She is a key which opened the doors of his success. But he never accepts her as a wife and treats her inhumanly. It makes a deep chasm between them. In case of Jaya and Mohan there is also same chasm between them as there are no love and mutual understanding. She brought up in the unemotional surroundings does not understand meaning of true love. She is confused about this vital relation which is also the binding vine between different human relations. Just after getting married she misunderstands love she says:

*Love...? yes, what else could I call it but love, when? Thought of how I had longed for his physical presence, when I remembered how readily, almost greedily, I had responded to his touch? What else could I name it when I thought of the agony it*



*had been to be without him, when his desires, his approval, his love had seemed, to be the most important thing in my life.(15)*

Her thinking revolves around Mohan only so she feels the need of Mohan and his need of her. She never gets warmth in her relationship with him. Her personal happiness and gratification do not carry any weight to Mohan and to himself too. She fully knows her future and relationship with him. Despite it she cannot dare to leave her culture totally. No matter her marital relationship is unable to give her satisfaction, peace of mind and love, she cannot go away of her identity as Mohan's wife. Her emotional void is reflected in his words, "Love But what did I know of love? Even the love stories I'd written they had been as if I had gone a spinning out the fantasies of my adolescence love? No, I knew nothing of it" (152).

Shashi Deshpande very effectively expounds the aim of only individual happiness in marriage. Jaya belongs to average household. From beginning she developed fear of speech for fear of ridicule from males Appa, her father who always prevent her in doing any task of her taste. Her father and brother criticized whenever got opportunities to rebuke. Due to that she jumps into silence which becomes easier to her. Later she avoids confessing to Mohan that she actually likes to watch heads in the movies more than movies, reasons behind this were liberty and freedom shown in threads. Her inability to find words loads Jaya to embark upon a long silent journey. Finally she holds silence, the utter silence. "But the words remained unsaid. I know his mood was best met with silence" (78), "But I said nothing. It was so much simpler to say nothing. So much less complicated" (99). She is taught to take Mohan as her God. Her traditional upbringing makes her to sacrifice herself on the altar of marriage. *Bertrand Russe* opines:

*Love, like everything that is great and precious, demands its own morality, and frequently entails a sacrifice of the less to the greater; but the sacrifice must be voluntary for , where it is not, it will destroy the very basis of the love for the sake for which it is made.(215)*

After marriage whole life of girl changes, this is discernible in case of Jaya. She gives up her ambition of becoming a writer because she was led into believing that her husband is her career, her profession and her means of livelihood. Shashi Deshpande has highlighted many burning issues of modern discourse of feminism. Through the characters of Jaya, Asha, Mukta, Kusum etc. the novelist depicts the complexities of Indian woman of the modern age. In the life of Indian women marriage plays pivotal role. It changes their entire life. As far as husbands are concerned in the lives of their wives, they live as they were living. They rejoice in their life carrying no sign of being married. Jaya sees her individual fate becoming the common fate of women whom she sees around her, bound and suffocated in marriage. Jaya meditates as to why woman plunge into the marital fire and keep burning silently. The reason



that occurs to her is, *We're all frightened of the dark, frightened of being alone* (102). It is both a personal weakness as well as social fate of women in the Indian society.

Shashi Deshpande expounds that without male support even the strongest is considered weak one whereas wife being or not being in husband's life does not bring apparent change. Fear of being isolated without man hovers on woman. Divorce and widowhood pull on silently in marriage as Jaya thinks on what Ravi, her brother, whose wife Asha has left after a quarrel would have liked her to tell Asha:

*Go home like a good girl, Asha... Go back home and obey your husband. And never mind, whatever it is he has done, he's your husband,...(115).*

No one listens her, asks her the reason of her decision of leaving home. Because she is expected to be mute speaker. Shashi Deshpande reveals psychological distance between Jaya and Mohan. Due to that there is only deep silence which leads to unhappiness in Jaya's life. Before her marriage she is taught lets without caring her emotions and feelings. Vanita mami tells her that a husband is *a sheltering tree*. Ramu kaka reminds her that the happiness of her husband and home depends entirely on her. Her brother advises her, *to be good to Mohan* (13). She has to mould herself according to the needs and desires of her husband. She gives up her job that she wanted to take the baby she wanted to adopt and the anti-price campaign she wanted to take part in. Mohan blames her to be careless to his family time to time but she does not speak. She keeps on speculation in silence, *No question, no retorts, only silence* (144). She captures herself in the fort of silence to avoid problems. This is really inhuman to make persons speechless and treats them as they are not made of flesh and blood. It is an insult to compare person to animal. The novelist uses a beautiful image to describe Jaya's married life:

*A pair of bullocks yoked together. It is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful and what animals would voluntarily choose pain?(11-12)*

Bullocks yoked together share the burden between themselves. They don't know how they are attached and love each other. The ideological difference creates a wide chasm between them and they fail to understand each other. Consequently monotony, solution and loneliness enter marital life. There is no love only compromise. Out of social fear they are bound to live under the same roof. It does not matter whether they are happy or not. Whenever Mohan finds Jaya's odd behaviour towards him and his family, he plainly speaks not do that. He tells, "My mother against my father, however badly he behaved to her" (83). In this way he reveals his expectation from her. Thus, he gradually pushes her in the traditional world. In spite of the pile of accusations on her she is silent. She wonders, "Oh, God, why could not I



speak? Why couldn't I say something?... I could say nothing"(120). At the worst odds she "saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender" (36). She has been silent even on crucial domestic issues.

*That Long Silence* is not an intrusion into the world of silence but a silent communication with the oppressed self straining for articulation. Shashi Deshpande expounds that higher education to girls has opened the door for the quest of identity. It helps many to realization of woman as independent being with their own needs and satisfaction. When she is free to live her life on her own terms, our tradition redeems her. If she breaks, feels segregated from the society. Individual happiness is good to nothing before old established orders in the society. Another female character Mukta, neighbour of Jaya is also widow. Jaya has seen her fanciful image so she says:

*Mukta, to me, was that dancer, holding in her still, mute body all those ideas, emotions and feelings contained in the song. Sometimes. I'd often thought, the singer will stop singing, and then it will all flow out of her. Or did the song come to an end for her when Arun, her husband, fell out of the train and died?(67).*

She lives a life with little merriment, and her life style irritates Jaya:

*Mukta had more days of fast than days on which she could eat a normal meal. Her self- mortification seemed to be the most positive thing about her. And yet her piety – surely it was that which prompted those fasts? – seemed meaningless, since she had already forfeited the purpose of it, the purpose of all Hindu women's fasts- the avoidance of widowhood. (67)*

All these stir Jaya internally and externally. Jaya is also jolted by Kusum's incident, who to avoid monotony, depression, melancholy plunges into well to end all problems. Kusum and Jaya were looked upon as a pair in childhood. Though she resented but always has concern to Kusum. She thinks about the reason of her suicide, and finds indifference of parents. Parents' indifference makes children hopeless and pessimist. But Jaya's heart is badly shaken hearing the news of Kusum's suicide. She thinks that it would have better if Kusum were done to death immediately after death. All these show how inhuman our patriarchal system has been. Under which they are treated inhumanly.

As the present paper is a moderate endeavour to explore humanistic vision in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. Jaya finally realizes the need to break her silence of the seventeen years. For this way she cannot hold solution. No longer will she live life unprotected. Now she keeps a hope in her heart with her firm determination to erase her



silence which stands for the assertion of her feminine voice. She decides to hold her identity as Jaya not as Suhasini.

In the married life of Jaya treachery lies and deception take place instead of love, affection and mutual understanding. So Jaya is dissatisfied with her married life. She is busy with the contemplation about childhood, girlhood and womanhood. Since childhood she is taught to follow instruction of men with little complain. But stealthily she manages to do task of her own liking. Upon the lot of girls Bernard Shaw has rightly pointed out, “Home is the girl’s prison and the women’s workshop is very true in case of Jaya” (358). After marriage Jaya is endowed with new name ‘Suhasini’ by her husband Mohan. Meaning of ‘Suhasini’ is “a soft smiling placid motherly woman”(16). She does not like this name but can not oppose them. She does not use this name entire novel. She feels confident when she remembers the meaning of Jaya, name given by her Apppa. She does not like to see herself as a poor idiotic woman. She feels that it is inhuman to impose new identity including desires and whims upon anyone. When she goes through the pages of her diaries she realizes that ‘there were only the bare skeletal outlines of her life. Its essential core had been left out. *The agonised cries- ‘I can’t cope, I can’t manage, I can’t go on- had been neatly smothered. She had waged* for so many years of her life, a life spent on trivialities’ and with accusations from her husband that she had not cared for the children and had isolated herself from him and his concerns. Finally she has self realization and feels no need to be submissive to Mohan. She will break her silence on the papers after being broken into many pieces.

Shashi Deshpande, through the character of Jaya, Kusum, Aasha, Mukta presents the picture of the oppressed Indian women. The novel ends with the optimistic note. Through Jaya the novelist depicts the inhuman behaviour and treatment of man-made society towards women whereas both are the two sides of the same coin so can’t be separated. Without the freedom and liberty there is no meaning of life and becomes worthless to live. It cannot be denied that compromise and adjustments are necessary in the life to have prestigious social life but one can do to some extent. Being happy with Kamat, Jaya finally goes back to her previous life after speculation. She wants to resume her domesticity by making a compromise. But new Jaya, thereafter, emerged. She feels the need to be protected from sinking in the crumbling world around her; she goes with her sheltering tree with the hope.

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