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Man-Woman Relationship in Shashi Deshpande's that Long Silence

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the man-woman relationship in the novel, That Long Silence, the most significant novel of Shashi Deshpande. This study explores the discrimination against Jaya in her marital life and the sexual oppression experienced by her. This novel exposes the struggle between patriarchy and individuality. Shashi portrays the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity. She shows the emptiness in a man-woman relationship in marriage.

Keywords: man-woman relationship, discrimination, patriarchy, marriage

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande is a prominent name in Indian English literature. She was born Dharwad in Karnataka in 1938 as the daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist Sriranga. She completed her education in Bombay and Bangalore. Shashi Deshpande is an Indian English novelist stands apart, for she writes about certain specific concern for women.. Shashi Deshpande's major concern is to show the torments of the modern educated Indian woman caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality and independence for the women on the other. Her fiction explores the search of the woman to fulfill herself as a human being, independent of her traditional role as a daughter, wife and mother. Shashi Deshpande's concern and sympathy are primarily for the women. While revealing the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity for herself, the author subtly bears the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression experienced by women in our society.

That Long Silence

*"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 of the world."*¹

Shashi Deshpande gleans the title for her novel "That long silence" from the statement of Elizabeth Robins. She received the Sahitya Akademy Award for her novel That Long Silence in 1990 and Padma Shri in 2009. Jaya, the protagonist and narrator of the story, is an educated housewife who has writings skills. Mohan, Jaya's husband, works as an engineer in the purchase section of a company. In his pursuit of prestige, involves in certain malpractice and he is caught taking bribes. He faces an inquiry and may perhaps lose his job. He is advised by his partner in the crime, Agarwal, to stay away from the office and his present house at Church gate temporarily. Jaya's children are away on a tour with their family friends. Jaya acquiesces to her husband's decision and goes with him silently to their present exile at the Dadar flat which belongs to Jaya's Maternal uncle.

The process of self-retrospection begins for Jaya. She recalls all the incidents and events that happened in her life after marriage with Mohan, the frustrations and disappointments in her seventeen-years-old marital life, her failure, all these begin to torture her. Kamat, her neighbor, a widower, helps Jaya in her self-realization. Finally, she decides to break her silence speak up.

Relationship between Jaya and Mohan

*"Marriage is a very strange thing. It's a very public institution, it's meant to tell the world that two people are going to live together, to declare that their children will be legal, that these children can inherit their property. It's meant for social living, to ensure that some rules are observed so that men and women don't cross the lines drawn from them. At the same time, marriage is an intensely private affair, no outsider will know the state of someone else's marriage. It's a closed room, a locked room..."*²

The above statement reflects in the relationship between Jaya and Mohan in 'That Long Silence'. The relationship of the main character, Jaya Kulkarni,

with her husband is filled with hard-hearted silence.

Jaya is caught between tradition and individuality. Though she knows liberal ideas, she accepts patriarchy as a part of her life. She is unable to run away from the clutches of a male-dominated society.

She says, *"No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can't fool myself. The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together... it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go indifferent would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?"* (TLS 11-12)

She has been conditioned by the elders not to question her husband. Her aunt, Vanita Mami, prepares her mentally before her wedding, ***"Remember Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree. Keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies"*** (TLS32)

Mohan marries Jaya not out of love but she resembles his dream girl who talks fluently in English. He proudly says: ***"You know, Jaya, the first day I met you at your Kamukaku's house, you were talking to brother Dinkar and somehow you sounded so much like that girl. I think it was at that moment that / decided I would marry you."*** (TLS90)

Her marital life appears to her a meaningless exercise of being together. Her frustration is visible through her words. ***"We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us."*** (TLS 185) They keep a psychological distance between them rather than speak out about their issues. Because of lack of communication, Jaya becomes a silent victim. Though she wants to break the silence she does not find words to answer his questions.

Jaya questions herself and her relationship with her husband, Mohan. In many ways, Mohan kills her inner urge to create her own identity and he alters her space and her relationships. She realizes that Mohan has limited her sensitivity.

As a married lady, she depends on Mohan and this she considers derogatory. Mohan crushes not only the woman in Jaya but also the writer. Jaya recalls their relationship as husband and wife: ***"First there's love, then there's sex- that was how I had always imagined it to be. But after living with Mohan I had realized that it could so easily be the other way round."*** (TLS 95)

Mohan is happy and takes pride in the fact that his wife is a writer but gets infuriated when he reads one of her stories. The story which makes Mohan angry is about ***"a couple, a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body."*** (TLS144).

Mohan believes that the story tells about their real life and he is very scared that his acquaintance may think that he is the kind of person portrayed in the story. He protests: ***"Jaya how could you, how could you have done it?... they will all know now, all those people who read this and know us, they will know that these two persons are us, they will think I am this kind of a man, they will think I am this man..."*** (TLS143-144)

Though she knows there is no truth in what her husband thinks, she does not argue with him. She stops writing. She says: *Looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced. I had done him wrong and I had stopped writing after that. Perhaps if Mohan had been angry, if he had shouted and raged at me, if he had forbidden me to write, perhaps would have fought him and gone on. But he had only shown me his heart, and I had not been able to counter that. I had relinquished them instead, all those stories that had been taking scared –scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had my marriage.* (TLS144)

Their sexual relationship is very mechanical, without any affection. Mohan's indifferent attitude towards her desire fills her with a sense of loneliness and disillusion. ***"But, lying there my body still warm and throbbing from the contact with his, it had come to me in one awful moment- that I was alone. The contact, the coming together, had been not only momentary but wholly illusory as well. We had never come together, only our bodies had done that. I had begun to cry then, despairingly, silently, scared that I would wake Mohan up, trying desperately, to calm myself"*** (TLS 98) Their physical relationship always ends up with Mohan's question of whether he has hurt her. She keeps quiet and cries silently. Her frustration is visible through her words. ***"We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us."*** (TLS185)

Mohan has clear views about what a wife should be. He wants his wife to be 'Sahasini', the name given by Mohan. Mohan tells Jaya, ***"My mother never raised her voice against my father however badly he behaved to her"*** (TLS83) She soon learns to reconcile with Mohan's adamant silence. Both names symbolise the traits of her personality former is closer to her rebellious nature and the latter to her submissive nature.

When Mohan gives a wire 'all well', Jaya determines to welcome him and resolves to break her silence. Finally, she says emphatically, ***"I'll have to break the silence between us."*** (TLS 192)

Relationship between Jaya and Kamat

Jaya is attached to Kamat, a widower, who is Jaya's neighbour in Dadar. Kamat is an advertiser and lives alone above the apartment at Dadar. Their relationship cannot be stamped as an extramarital affair, but they share a fruitful relationship.

"My relationships with this man...refused to take any shape at all; it just slipped about, frighteningly fluid". (TLS151)

Jaya feels awkward when she sees Kamat cooking but he doesn't. He has no reservation against doing "unmanly" things like cooking. In his presence, Jaya sheds the crippling silence she imposed on herself. She feels confident and comfortable in his company. Consequently, she confides in him things she would never dare mention to Mohan. She gets from Kamat the best of her father's concern and reassurance for her.

With this man, I had not been a woman. I had been just myself –Jaya There had been the ease in our relationship I had never known in any other, she gratefully acknowledges. (TLS153)

Jaya leaves him at the time when he is dying. The best part of Mr. Kamat is that he sees her as an equal. He is altogether different from Mohan. While Mohan discourages Jaya from writing Mr. Kamat introduces her with her lost 'self. Jaya sheds her restraints in Kamat's presence who gives her reassurance and comfort in a fatherly way. He advises Jaya to be honest with herself and realise her faults. When Jaya feels sad about her father's death, she finds solace in Kamat's company. At that moment she wants to respond to him with her body but she immediately restrains herself so that she can safeguard her married life. In a way she shares an intimate relationship with him, she responds to his touch, kiss and embrace. He makes her understand that it is a part of life. He says, *"The relation of man to woman is so natural of one person to another."* (TLS153)

Conclusion

*"He who robs us of our dreams robs us of our life."*³

Jaya shapes herself according to Mohan's wishes. She gives up her job, aborts their third baby, she even stops writing when Mohan accuses her. She learns that she has to maintain her silence to save their marriage. As Sangeeta Das puts it: *"In That Long Silence, Shashi Deshpande discusses the mute supplication of Jaya not only to her husband Mohan but her continuous obeisance to her father than to her elder brother and finally the most to her husband. Jaya's life is a living example of a middle-class educated woman of today's society who compromises at all the stages of her life to secure her position in the family."*⁴

Acquaintance with Kamat in Jaya's life fills up her inner urge. Kamat proves to be her true friend, philosopher and guide. He enlightens in herself self-confidence, courage and thinking ability. Kamat encourages her to go ahead listening to herself and reminds her about her potentiality and efficiency of doing something great.

Kamat is just the opposite of Mohan and a very sensitive man. His intelligence draws Jaya towards him. She feels free and happy to exchange ideas with him. He provides constructive criticism on her writings. He understands and accepts her fears and tries to help her. Their relationship is warm, friendly, and companionable.

Jaya thinks about her relationship with Mohan recollecting the words of Kamat: *"The relationship of man to woman is the most natural of one person to another. Natural? There's only treachery, only deceit, only betrayal."* (TLS 158)

Despite his support and encouragement, Jaya leaves him dying because of social fear. Mr. Kamat dies of a heart attack and though she witnesses it, does nothing and leaves him alone to die. Her association with Kamat is meaningful but to save her family, she becomes indifferent towards him also. Jaya carries this guilt within her all the time. Jaya's negative approach and her habit of analyzing every situation cause havoc in her personal life.

*"Marriage incites man to a capricious imperialism"*⁵

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