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**The Perspectives of Indian Woman's Plight in Deshpande's  
*That Long Silence***

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### Abstract

To relocate the position of women in the patriarchal order has been a persistent effort of the writers and thinkers in post-colonial India. To make a representation of their subjugated position, feminist writers tried to collaborate with the ideals of humanism enunciated by post colonial critics. Women are left to survive in the confined spaces of domesticity, kept in dark to bear the burden of patriarchy in silence and sobbing. They were treated as the second sex and were not permitted to participate in the activities of business world. Their identity is defined only in context of the identity of their male counterparts. In Indian society where religious values dominated women's position, and gave the status of 'goddess' to her, surviving with the ideals of sacrifice, love, sensibility, patience and resistance did not permit her freedom and independent identity.

This paper attempts to show a woman's predicament in Indian society. Shashi Deshpande has raised a voice against the woman's suppressed agony by her novel, *That Long Silence*.

Hope the paper will be helpful to those who are pursuing their research in post-colonial female writers.

#### Key words:

Post-colonial, agony, patriarchal, feminist, subjugation..



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The existing disparities in the demographic, economic and social indicators between males and females are a testimony to the consequences of gender inequality faced by the Indian woman of region. Being influenced by western feminist writers, the post Independence Indian women writers have engaged themselves in devising verbal strategy for rejecting 'male cold' literary conventions historically accepted as 'standards'. Shashi Deshpande is one the prominent contemporary women writers in Indian writing in English. She has created ripples in the society of male dominant by taking women as women seriously in her novels. She takes us inside the consciousness of her women characters to present their plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions. But she is a feminist with a difference. While reading her novels, one is aware of passing through a "lived" experience without any extra colouring of feministic tilt.

In Indian society the blessing like may you be the mother of hundred sons shows the status of the woman in the family as well as the step-motherly attitude towards the daughters. The woman in India leads a life of multi-curse, multi-abuse and multi-neglect. Unwanted, uncared for, neglected and treated as an inferior being, she is conditioned to accept a second class status in the traditional male dominated socio-economic-religious set up. Shashi Deshpande is quite aware of this injustice implied in the forced silence of the millions of Indian women. In the land where the Goddess of Wealth, Goddess of Knowledge, and Goddess of Power all are women, the real situation is diametrically different.

Here in this paper it has been chosen to analyze and interpret the text of *That Long Silence*, a Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel, to fetch out the Indian woman's plight in the form of Jaya, the protagonist character of the novel. In *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande raises her strong voice of protest against the male-dominated Indian society and against man-made rules and conventions. *That Long Silence* is a first person narrative; the story is unfolded by Jaya, ironically again symbolizing victory, while in the actual life situation, she is supposed to lead a traditional, passive life like "Seeta following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails..."<sup>1</sup> She refuses these role models because in modern life these references are simply allusions of the past with no relevance to the present. While these legendary women followed their husbands willingly, Jaya is accompanying Mohan everywhere because of compulsion. There is a frank, even brutal, realization of this evil necessity in her conjugal life:



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Two 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 animal would voluntarily choose pain? (11-12)

Jaya, in the very early life realizes that being a 'Girl Child' is her first problem. The preference shown to the male children is because they are permanent members of the family, and are inheritors of the family name. When Jaya is told by Ramukaka-"you have no place here", (12) she feels not just inconsequential, but wholly blotted out. The reason given for her missing name in the family tree is that now she is married in some other family. But even no justification is given for the unmentioned names like that of "Kaki" or "ajji" who is a dominant figure, "who single handedly kept the family together." (12) The narrator investigates that the culture chooses to ignore that a woman is also a significant part of the family.

The novel also interrogates the nature of the relationship between the narrator and her husband and the disposition of their married life. In her childhood she had been told a number of times the importance of a husband in a woman's life. This education finds an expression in Jeeja's words: "what is a woman without kumkum?" (14) Jaya had learnt at an early age that a husband is like a "Sheltering tree" (14), a protection, and a security. But later the novel questions the limit to the devotion to the husband, the caringness to the children. However that learning transmits into their relationship. Her father had named her Jaya that stands for "Victory". On her wedding day her husband gave her the name 'Suhasini', so she is Jaya but Suhasini as well, "a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman" (15-16) Though Jaya is educated and influenced by the modern thought of the west and is herself a writer yet she is forced to compare herself with the traditional images of a devoted wife and dutiful mother.

Jaya suffers silently as a traditional wife. She tries hard to fit into this traditional role. She seeks to become a 'smiling', placid, motherly woman'-a role suggested by mellifluous name "Suhasini". She almost loses herself into a dutiful daughter, devoted wife and loving mother. Even though Mohan is caught in an act of malpractice, she is expected to accompany him. Their relationship is affected adversely by their incapability to understand each other. Due to lack of communication, the growing 'silence' between them, their marital life grows unsteady and dismal. Further, for the first time Jaya feels a strange emotion of anger in the unjustified accusation by Mohan that he has taken bribe for her and her children which touches her to the quick. The very idea of "being a partner in the crime, and ally" when she has no role to play in the whole affair, is revolting. (31) But this anger transformed into a "long silence". Because, for Jaya, silence and surrender, have been considered as the real strength of



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an Indian woman. Mohan's mother lived in suffering and died so as, Vimla who followed the footprints of her mother, silently suffering her hemorrhage. Jaya also tries her best to cultivate the tradition of silence but role playing does not come naturally to her and so the cracks are soon visible. Because, the fact was that her father has always instilled in her, since childhood, that her name is Jaya; so she should be always victorious. Traces of that assurance are still lurking in her heart, though apparently she behaves like a traditional wife willing to cater to all the needs of her husband.

Yet Jaya is not a prescriptive feminist character; and naturally so, because of her traditional middle class background. She hovers between submission and assertion, the former rather a more dominant note in her character. But the repeated allegations and accusations of her husband compel her to react sharply. Jaya has been writing a fortnightly column "Seeta". Now Mohan tells that he has always encouraged her. In return, she has done completely nothing to cope with the current crisis. Jaya blames him that she has to leave her writing finally because of the family, because of looking after a husband and two children. When the quarrel goes on longer than expected, she realizes the bitter truth that frustration against each other has been brewing between them since long. Jaya now comes to the conclusion that Mohan has never been able to accept her as Jaya (victory); he always wants her to be Suhasini (the soft spoken). While like her father, Kamat, her neighbour living suggests her to make her women angry because they are subjected to a humiliating life. Kamat becomes a critic and an objective but sensitive reader of her stories and points out that her stories lack the anger. He is a man who is free of all the male complexes, with him Jaya could be an individual, just Jaya. She could talk to him about things she could not say to anyone. But this friendship is also not approved by society. Jaya finds the difference between Mohan and Kamat like that Mohan treated her 'as a woman' while Kamat treated her 'as an individual'. Mohan teaches Jaya that for a woman, to be angry is to be unwomanly. Jaya, too, now believes in those roles. But what puzzles her is this: "how did I get this way? I 'm sure I wasn't always like this? (76) Because Mohan feels that it is unwomanly to be angry she starts holding that view and once tells Kamat:

.....no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman? .....A woman can never be angry. She can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated (147)



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Jaya like so many other Indian women has been trained to be silent. It is evident even in their physical relationship: "...whatever, my feeling had been then, I had never spoken of them to him.....The only words between us had been his question, 'Did I hurt you?' and my answer, 'No.' "... what if I say 'yes'? What will that do to him? But I knew I would never say it. I could not" (95) But it is her realization that despite seventeen years of married life they have not become one; only their bodies occasionally meet, not their souls: "We were two persons. A Man... A Woman" (8)

These are three distinct phases of feminism. The early, means imitation of role models. Jaya has already crossed that limit. The first phase of imitation is followed by anger and protest, the major thrust of the novel is the depiction of this second phase in the life of Jaya. Whenever, she looks back on her life, there is hardly any sense of nostalgia or yearning for the past; it is much more a feeling of suppressed anger which can burst out any time. The last phase of feminism is that of articulation and assertion are only hinted at in this novel as one of the future possibilities for Jaya. The whole novel is a preparation for that articulation which will break her long silence. The reader is given sufficient hint that she is going to break her passivity; even Jaya assert, "I will have to erase the silence between us", but the actual drama is postponed to the future. (192) Having realized her position, Jaya would not accept the earlier image of a pair of bullocks yoked together, signaling a loveless couple.

Jaya comes to realize that life can always be made possible. The earlier impulsive Jaya becomes a mature woman, and with her realization, shadow that befalls between wife and husband tends to disappear.

Shashi Deshpande seems to give a very important message to the Indian Women through the character of Jaya-

Women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their own victimization....It is only through self analysis and self-understanding, through vigilance and courage, they can begin to change their lives"<sup>2</sup> (Palkar 134)

As the honest writer, she raised her eye brows:

The problem faces me all the time for I am constantly referred as a 'woman writer'. Why is the word 'woman' necessary? ....Would the phrase 'male writer' have been used for a man?" (Deshpande: 34-35)



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True to this, the novelist tries to establish that it is not only the patriarchal set up which is responsible for the women's condition in the Indian society. The responsibility also lies within the victim to refuse, to raise a voice and to achieve the goal. The novel also traces the growth of the protagonist from a state of weakness, feeling of failure to that of relaxation. She accomplishes this through self-assessment and self-criticism.



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