

Chapter IV

Suffocation and Resurrection of the Individual's Self

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is an expression of the silence of the modern Indian housewife. In the novel *That Long Silence*, the novelist depicts two different pictures of Indian women at two parallel levels; the lower strata of women engaged in menial domestic chores to earn their living and educated middle class women of some financial independence. Women at both these levels prefer to get married and maintain their marriage, for failure in marriage is considered to be a woman's greatest failure.

The novel *That Long Silence* represents a constitutive attempt at the redefinition of a women's selfhood in an environment where age-old patriarchal assumptions clash with liberal ideas of individuation. The confrontation with the truth of herself is a painful process, involving a prolonged phase of intense introspection. The writer realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya and her quest for identity.

The novel is the story of an educated middle class girl, Jaya, who finds herself restricted in her married life. Jaya, the protagonist undergoes a crisis of recriminations and self-admonishment. Anuradha Ray in the book *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers: A Study of Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock, Nayantara Sahgal's Storm in Chandigarh, Attia Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column, Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli and Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence* writes that she passes through what Kamini Dinesh describes as ““a bitter realization of constraints, disenchantment and self-deprecation,” to a courageous and fair proportioning of responsibility which does not ignore her own culpability” (84).

Jaya is a convent-educated, English-speaking lady with a quest for literature. The writer portrays the conflict raging between the narrator's split self – the writer and the housewife. In her zeal to play out the role of a loyal wife and a caring mother, she has suppressed her desires that lead to self-actualization and fulfillment. There are many more reasons that deny the fulfillment of Jaya's individuality. Like the other women she too is indoctrinated right from her childhood.

Jaya is the neglected child of the urban, middle class family. She becomes a victim of wrong child-rearing practice followed in the Indian households. She has received a higher education, in spite of gender discrimination. Jaya, since her childhood, has designed her life in according to her family member's desires. She always feels difference in her mother's attitude towards her and her brothers. Her longing for her mother's love never fulfilled. She sadly recalls "When I had passionately wanted her love, she had ignored me and concentrated on her sons . . . 'Smarming' – that had been Dada's word for her behaviour; and the smarming had never been for me. When I got married, she had been unperturbed, there had been not even a pretence of tears when I left home" (106) and "I longed for a soft, motherly breast to cry on. And then I had to smile . . . I had never gone to her for comfort" (139).

Jaya has had the advantage of a supportive father, one who not merely cosseted her but has inculcated in her a positive belief in herself, calling her Jaya, for victory. As a child she feels free to voice her opinion vociferously; as her *ajji* complained, she has "for everything a question, for everything a retort" (27). The same lively spirit has often been exhibited itself through tantrums during her adolescent years. Then what has changed her to a submissive housewife? She herself is puzzled by the transformation. She thinks "I'm

scared of cockroaches, lizards . . . almost the stereotype of a woman; nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support. But what puzzles rue is this: how did I get this way? I'm sure I wasn't always like this" (76).

It is perhaps the death of her father, the man who always reiterated: "You are not like the others, Jaya" (136). Jaya has more expectations from life because her father had made her feel special; he had high hopes for her. He would dream that Jaya either bags an international award or goes to Oxford. However, his ultimately death shatters her dreams and makes her to face the reality that she is after all like any other middle class girl destined to be a wife and a mother. His support having been taken away, the concerted impact of grandmothers, mothers, aunt, cousins could no longer be ignored. Detached from her moorings, isolated in a college hostel in an unfamiliar town, she realized that she "did not want to be different from the others" (136). She had let herself slide into prescribed behavioural patterns, re-moulded herself by suppressing the vocal, angry, questioning self so lovingly nurtured by her father. Jaya loses her father at the age of fifteen and her brother considers her a burden and this leads her to marry Mohan. Before her marriage, Jaya is taught the importance of the husband in the life of a woman.

Jaya's upbringing demands the suppression of the self so the marriage can survive. She is taught to merge her identity in that of her husband. In childhood, Jaya used to be of witty and inquisitive nature, which made her grandmother say, "Look at you – for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that?" (27). Jaya is thus conditioned towards the comforts of her future life-partner.

The counsels of her aunts keep ringing in her ears, and this becomes the cause of her undoing. Vanitamami counsels of her just before her marriage: "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” (32). “Without the tree, you’re dangerously unprotected and vulnerable” (32). She further says “If your husband has a mistress or two, ignore it; take up a hobby instead – cats, maybe, or your sister’s children” (31). These words keep on echoing in the ears of Jaya and she realizes that since a husband is like “a sheltering tree,” he must be nourished and nurtured adequately even if the wife has to suffer to give it nourishment. At the time of Jaya’s marriage, Ramukaka tells her that the happiness of her husband and home depends on her. Dada advised her to be good to Mohan. Jaya does not take the counsel too seriously but for her part she does not prove herself different from others. So the relation between the husband and wife move on smoothly.

After her marriage, Jaya, who used to consider herself independent and intelligent, shapes herself to suit her husband’s model of a wife. She gets transformed into “stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support” (76). Apparently she has all the material comforts and is almost satisfied. But she has to compromise and suppress many aspects of her individuality for this. In fact, she keeps on changing herself according to her husband’s likes and dislikes. As a result of this, her individuality gets annihilated.

Jaya tries to mould herself to suit the requirements of her husband and her family. Mohan clearly defines views about what a wife should do. He wants his wife to be ‘Suhasini’ and not ‘Jaya.’ Jaya does not protest the change of her name from Jaya to Suhasini at her marriage just to keep Mohan happy. She dare not laugh aloud in his presence. Slowly and painfully she learns that a wife should not be angry with her

husband because that undoes his position of authority. Her dress and appearance are proof of her submission to Mohan's liking, replicating an absorbed family woman.

'Suhasini' becomes the symbol of submissive housewife, to only care and look after her children, maintain the home well in order. Shashi Deshpande condemns the scheme of changing a woman's name as the part of a marriage. It is not changing her name but changing her identity is enslaving her to the new house. She negates her own self and accepts the role of a traditional housewife.

Alladi Uma in the book *Woman and Her family, Indian and Afro-American: A Literary Perspective* writes that Jaya has systematically suppressed her free will as she is taught the "importance and necessity of stable marriage and family – family as security, as a source of emotional strength" (4). She knows very well that to survive within marriage, one has to learn many tricks, and silence is one of these tricks. Therefore, she silences her emotions as well as her physical desires.

Jaya gradually learns that his mood is best met with silence. She tries to fit herself into that 'Suhasini' image. She cut off those bits of Jaya, which did not fit into Suhasini image. The attitude of women is robust and practical. Realizing that men are men, they leave them to their own way. They find nothing wrong or shameful when beaten by their husbands, in fact it is considered to be their privilege since husbands for them are a symbol of social prestige.

To Jaya, married life becomes unbearable and monotonous. She gets frustrated and says: "Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony" (4). Marriage stifles the growth and right to free expression of a wife. A woman's role and contribution to the society is defined in terms of her role as a

wife, daughter, sister or mother. Commenting on her married life, Jaya says that waiting is a part of her existence: “But for women the waiting game starts early in childhood. *Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws’ home. Wait until you have kids.* Yes, ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait” (30).

Jaya, like her mythological counterpart Seeta, or Suhasini remains stuck to her husband and children. Jaya, like every wife, feeds Mohan and her son Rahul on affections and love in and out of time in all circumstances of life in the past. In order to become an ideal wife and mother, she devotes herself to the comforts of her husband and to the maintenance of the house. In this process, she feels that she has no identity, no status of her own. Jaya is reduced to her core self. She has tried to play the role of a traditional woman, the embodiment of tolerance, suffering and courage. She describes her relationship with Mohan as a mechanical and forced relationship:

A pair of bullocks yoked together . . . 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 two persons. A man. A woman. (8)

The crisis unmask the two – Mohan and Jaya. The crisis at Mohan’s office begins to affect the affairs at home. He expects Jaya go into hiding with him, which she refuses to comply with. She is not willing to go into hiding with her husband. She is ashamed of the incident but Mohan defends himself by saying “It was for you and the children that I did this. I wanted you to have a good life, I wanted the children to have all

those things I never had” (9). Mohan expects his wife to share this crisis unconditionally, just to soften the impact of the forces he has set into motion against himself. She realizes that Mohan loses his interest in her. He accuses her of her changed behaviour in the days of adversity and of never having cared for him.

The undesirable accusation puts her into anger and insanity and she giggles violently and angrily on Mohan’s accusations: “I had to control myself, I had to cork in this laughter. But it was too late. I could not hold it in any longer. Laughter burst out of me, spilled over, and Mohan stared at me in horror as I rocked haplessly” (122). This incident affects her career as a writer and it has left a deep impression on her psyche.

Jaya is totally lost as she is taken for granted by her husband. She realizes that her own feelings and emotions don’t mean anything to him. She ponders over her relations with Mohan and also analyses her suppressed self. Jaya is rather honest and she could not persist the hypocrisy shown by her husband. For anything that happens, which is good the credit is taken by him but if some harm happens Jaya is blamed for that. Jaya gets angry.

As a husband, Mohan never tries to understand his wife, her emotions and her psychological needs. On the other hand, Jaya annihilates the creative aspect of her personality to keep Mohan happy. She devotes herself to the care and fulfillment of her husband’s and her children’s needs. Thus, obedience and loyalty, which are considered to be the virtues of Hindu womanhood degenerates into silent bearing of oppression. A woman is even expected not to be angry or revolting as stated in the novel: “A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There’s . . . no room for despair, either. There’s only order and routine” (147-148).

The novelist unravels the mental conflict of both Jaya and Mohan in the small

Dadar flat. Due to frustration, depression and a psychological distance between them they sink into silence without talking and sharing their ideas. There is no lasting companionship, only deep silence which leads to unhappiness in her home. Disgruntled with Mohan and at the consigned social milieu, Jaya wants to flee from the cribbed confines of an incarcerated domestic life in order to find a new identity for herself, a new mooring for her fugitive self.

Communication at the domestic and personal level is a failure: “Nothing. Nothing between us . . . nothing between me and Mohan either. We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us” (185). Jaya has never confessed her “frenetic emotions” (97) to Mohan as it has seemed “like a disease, a disability” (97), which he had to hide from everyone. Jaya pines for social communication but the society is impervious to her spiritual need. The society as a mirror “is always treacherous” (01) for it fails to show what she wants to see beyond her visual perception. There is hardly any communication between Jaya and Mohan, neither verbal nor emotional. Because of lack of communication, Jaya becomes a silent victim.

Jaya is not totally a silent and mute sufferer. Silence is her natural condition. When her husband, Mohan, talks about women being treated very cruelly by their husbands, which he calls strength, she passionately bursts into rumination: “He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender” (36).

Jaya instead of raising her voice in protest becomes a silent segregated woman. Keeping her grouses in her mind, she has learnt to withdraw herself under the shell of

silence. Mohan tells Jaya, “My mother never raised her voice against my father, however badly he behaved to her” (83) implying that Jaya, his wife should follow suit. In spite of the pile of accusations on her she is silent. She wonders, “. . . oh God, why couldn’t I speak? Why couldn’t I say something? . . . having nothing” (119). Her painful silence and suffering leave her emotionally scarred and mentally jolted.

In her attempts, the misunderstanding between the two made them alienated, not only from each other, but from their own selves also. Jaya was pained to feel: “Each relationship evolves its own vocabulary. Ours had been that of the workday world. The vocabulary of love, which I had thought would come to us naturally and inevitably, had passed us by; so too had the vocabulary of anger” (116). Jaya thinks that real emotional involvement is “Love? No, I knew nothing of it (153). S. Prasanna Sree in the book *Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande: A Study* quotes what Shashi Deshpande is so disgusted with their mechanical relationship, that she describes it as “a man and a woman married for seventeen years without mutual love or understanding” (78).

Mohan has married Jaya not out of love but simply because she resembled his dream girl when she talked fluently in English. He proudly asserts: “You know, Jaya, the first day I met you at your Kamukaku’s house, you were talking to your brother Dinkar, and somehow you sounded so much like that girl. I think it was at the moment that I decided I would marry you” (90).

Jaya’s feeling of helplessness when Mohan disappears for a few days and her anxious waiting for his return are a deliberate confirmation of her dependency. Years of losing herself in others has bred a crippling sense of dependency, destroys her own

resources of strength and grit. Her emotional crisis comes to such an extent that she cannot imagine a life without Mohan or his support. She thinks

The thought of living without him had twisted my insides. His death had seemed to me the final catastrophe. The very idea of his dying had made me feel so bereft that tears had flowed effortlessly down my cheeks. If he had been a little late coming home, I had been sure he was dead. By the time he returned, I had, in my imagination, shaped my life to a desolate widowhood. (96-97)

Though Jaya is a bold and a fearless woman she tries to behave like Suhasini, a nervous incompetent woman needing male support all the time.

After Mohan's departure, she feels that she is secure only with Mohan and has no face to show, no identity without him. It awakens her to her real place in life. Under these frustrating circumstances, Jaya gets terribly disturbed and starts questioning herself. She rethinks over her marital relationship. She realizes that she is not only Mohan's wife, rather she is an individual having her own distinct identity as she states: "I'm not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I'm 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 a fragmentation is not possible" (191). She hopes to be on equal terms with Mohan, and at the same time, accepts the established norms and values.

For seventeen long years of her marriage she successfully manages to suppress her feelings as she thinks it more important to be a good wife than being a good writer. Jaya's career as a successful writer is jeopardized right in the early years of her marriage. A short story of hers bags the first prize and also gets published in a magazine. The story

is about a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body. When she is in the threshold of getting recognition as a creative writer of some merit, Mohan, her husband expresses his displeasure at a particular story written by her. Mohan suspects that people would take him to be the man portrayed in the story; while Jaya thinks, “Looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced I had done him wrong. And I had stopped writing after that” (144). Jaya describes how she gave up writing for the joy of wifehood and motherhood: “Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mind – as Mohan’s wife, as Rahul’s and Rati’s mother . . . And so I had stopped writing” (148).

But the writer in her goads her to keep writing. She then begins to write under a pseudonym but her stories are rejected. She goes to the extent of changing the very stuff she would have loved to write. She never extends herself as a writer because she is afraid of failure. She loves to write the stuff of an angry young woman. Instead, she writes the soap opera Seeta stuff, which pleased Mohan and makes him say proudly “My wife is a writer” (119). She writes in English.

Kamat, the widower living above Jaya’s flat, functions as a mentor-critic, helps to give form to Jaya’s search for identity. He analyses the reason behind the successive rejections and tells her that her stories lack strong emotions as she suppresses her anger and frustration. She learns to control anger as Mohan considers this trait in a woman as “unwomanly.” Jaya not only suppresses her writing career but also her association with Kamat. She tells Kamat “Because no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?” (147). Kamat warns her against indulging in self-pity as it would only prove destructive to her. Kamat asks her to pursue her literary career by giving expression to her real inner self.

Kamat admonishes her “. . . beware of this “women are the victims” theory of yours. It’ll drag you down into a soft, squishy bog of self-pity. Take yourself seriously, woman. Don’t skulk behind a false name” (148). Gradually she begins to write light humourous pieces on the travails of a middle-class house-wife in a column entitled “Seeta.” She not only gets encouraging response from the readers but also a nod of approval from Mohan. She denies that her writings are the reflections of her individuality to play the role model of a typical Indian middle-class woman. Siddhartha Sharma in the book *Shashi Deshpande: A Feminist Study* quotes the words of Adele King who observes, that “In Jaya’s stories they lived happily ever after although she knows the falsity of the view of life” (40).

Because of the emptiness in her marriage, Jaya is drawn towards Kamat, who he treats her as his equal. She muses “With this man I had not been a woman. I had been just myself – Jaya” (153). He understands her literary capability and offers constructive criticism on her writings. He showers his attention on her; even receives her mail at his address to help her avoid any confrontation with her husband as he disapproves of her writings. He is unlike other men and Jaya feels at ease in his company that her womanly inhibitions wither and she opens up her problems to him. He is somehow different from other men. He pays due respect to women. He encourages her like her brother, sometimes compliments her like an ardent lover and dares to chide her like her father. It is in his presence that she becomes uninhibited and sheds all her identities as a daughter, wife, and a mother.

Jaya has ample opportunities for physical indulgence but she dares not to do so for fear of jeopardizing her marriage. It is yet again for this very reason that she feigns

detachment towards Kamat's death, when on one of her visits to his apartment she finds him struggling to breathe his last. Instead of attending to him, fearing that it would hurt Mohan if other neighbours gossip about her presence in Kamat's room she slowly leaves the room. She remains passive, as she does not want to endanger her marriage.

It pains Jaya to see that her mental state affects her son to such an extent that he never could have easy communication with his parents though the boy established easy comfortable rapport with his father's younger brother, Vasant. The inability to communicate honestly with her children troubles her. Her son's sudden disappearance from a holiday trip and the subsequent resurfacing at an uncle's home fills her with an acute sense of failure. She relinquishes "the halo of motherhood" (173) as she realizes the ultimate result of her obsession with fulfilling all her roles as woman at the cost of her own self-hood.

This makes her feel restless. In fact the whole nation seems to be in a state of restlessness. She watches from her flat the long silent nonviolent processions of strikes and lockouts of the factory labourers and the mill owners, providing a fitting background to her own long silence filled with untruths and dishonest, unbecoming deeds. Unable to free herself from the traditional code of conduct, her inner voice remains inarticulate even in her writings and her pent-up feelings make her neurotic.

Anuradha Ray in the book *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers: A Study of Anita Desai's Cry, The Peacock, Nayantara Sahgal's Storm in Chandigarh, Attia Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column, Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli and Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence*, quotes the words of Sarla Palkar who comments: "Caught in an emotional eddy, Jaya endeavours to come to terms with her

protean roles, while trying, albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self, which is but an ephemera – an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer” (85).

Now Jaya comes to know that the reason of her depressing condition is not the society alone, but she has to take the responsibility of her own state and work according to it. She rejects the idea of marriage as “two bullocks yoked together” (191).

Understanding that life cannot be lived in vacuum, she no longer looks at Mohan and herself as two bullocks, rather as two individual with independent minds. She realizes that meaningful co-existence can be achieved only through understanding and compassion, not through domination, subjugation or rejection.

Although Jaya is the product of the emancipated society, she has to make a compromise rather than a rebellion. She wants to bring an end to her role as the victim of silence. At the very same time the adverse situation changes for Jaya because Mohan sends a telegram informing her that the corruption case on him is settled amicably without loss of his job.

Rahul is back and with the “All well” (192) news from Mohan, she finds herself slipping into the grooves of her marital life again. But life with Mohan must be put on a new footing: “If Mohan returns, I thought, if only Rahul and Rati come back, we can begin living afresh . . .” (182). A change comes over her. She feels she is no more a victim of silence. She takes up the role of wife again with a difference, not like a dump woman. She has decided not to look for clues in Mohan’s face and then to give “him the answer . . . he wants” (193) but to speak out what she thinks is right, her deep rational reflections have given her an important insight about life.

Once she decides to compromise and breaks the cocoon of long seventeen year silence, her trauma is over. She realizes that Mohan has locked his heart to her and has not shared his problem with her because she too is not receptive. Lack of mutual understanding has created a chasm of silence between them. She feels that she can have her identity only if she has Mohan and her children with her. She confesses to Mukta, her neighbour, “. . . without Mohan, . . . I don't know what I am” (185). At any cost she is not ready to shred her wife-role and mother-role. Without these two hoods there is no life for her. This decision fills her with vigour and vitality.

Jaya realizes her situation as: “Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real ‘you’ never emerges. Looking for it is a bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces” (1). She realizes that life for her is to be lived fully in relationship with others. She remembers the words of Ramukaka, “Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you” (138). She foresees future with an affirmative vision full of hope. She believes, “Life has always to be made possible” (193).

S. Prasanna Sree, in the book *Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande: A Study* quotes the words of Sarala Parker who beautifully sums up the idea when she says: “The important insight that Shashi Deshpande imparts to us through Jaya is that women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their victimization instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves” (86).

Jaya thinks why lives life like a “pair of bulls yoked together”? (8) Why not create the harmony of orchestra with each instrument playing a different tune, together creating such beautiful music? She must never lose self-confidence. How can a person

lacking self-confidence in his or her own self build up confidence in others?. She remembers what Lord Krishna told Arjuna at the end of his sermon: “I have given you the knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire” (192). Thus had Lord Krishna granted humanness to Arjuna. So Shashi Deshpande questions if God wants each person to do what he desires then why shouldn't Jaya preserve her identity and be herself? How can she help others if she cannot help her own self? She must not let this conflict between tradition and modernity crushes her identity. This thought engages Jaya to liberate herself from the prescribed and interiorized role and find her own identity as a human being capable of thinking and acting on her own initiative.

When Jaya spends the days alone in the flat after Mohan walks out in a fit of anger, she has the opportunity to confront suppressed truths about herself not merely as a wife, but as a writer, a mother, a friend and a woman capable of strong physical urges. She comes to terms with her failure in the various roles in which she has lost herself and realizes where she has gone wrong.

Shashi Deshpande, through this novel, breaks the silence of woman and redeems them from their exile by giving a new lease of life. Jaya realizes that the mistake is hers and she establishes her identity by being bold; Deshpande gives an optimistic message through these words of Jaya, “We don't change overnight . . . but we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible” (193). This ‘change’ and ‘hope’ gives new confidence and bring Jaya the emancipation.

The heroine of the novel, Jaya, can be called a mouth piece of Shashi Deshpande herself. The way of thinking and opinions of Jaya is indisputably that of the writer. Her fifth novel, *That Long Silence* teaches the reader that the real empowerment

comes from our inner will and the capacity to reach beyond restricted and guarded forts. She successfully makes her readers realize that all path-breaking discoveries are the outcome of faith, which helps, mankind like a ladder to reach the zenith.

Thus, as the title of the novel *That Long Silence* indicates Jaya, for her seventeen years past life, has tried to play the role of a traditional woman, the embodiment of tolerance, suffering and courage. However she becomes the modern egotistical self-assertive rebellious woman – all these being marks of new-woman.