Shashi Deshpande' s *That Long Silence:* A Voice for Symmetrical Feminine Equality

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Abstract:- Shashi Deshpande's 'That Long Silence', published in 1988, is a compiling exploration of females internal struggle within the confines of societal expectations. The novel concentrates on Jaya, the protagonist and narrator, the mother of two who grapples with the pressure of her voice and identity in a circle/looped society where a woman, though educated, had to cut fit to the traditional roles of wife and mother often at the expense of her own aspiration. Jaya's self-expression reflects on her life confronting the long silence she had maintained. This silence also symbolizes the boarder experience of many women who have been subjected to this coercion, though sometimes self-inflicted but majorly social driven. Though equally capable, Jaya; a woman, refuses to be goaded by her husband; Mohan, and strives to give vent to her internal struggle that ultimately leads her to a path of self-discovery.

This internal dichotomy impelled Jaya to reclaim her voice. Through Jaya's personal journey, Deshpande also penned; through symbols, images, myths and cultural designs, the societal structures that, intentionally and unintentionally, perpetuate general inequality. This work of Shashi Deshpande' echoes with resilience that is warranted to break free from the metaphorically silence that permeates in many women advocating for a life of dignity, authenticity, and self-assertion.

Keywords:- Society, individuality, inequality, resilience, struggle and expectation.

Introduction: That Long Silence (1988), a feminist novel, written by Indian novelist Shashi Deshpande, imprints the story of struggle of Jaya (Suhasini) and other female characters in a male dominated society; either of upper middle class or lower working class, in modern India. That Long Silence is a brave attempt by the novelist to fill 'that silence' with desires and inner happiness so that the female can live life whole heartedly in our patriarchal society. The present study is an attempt to bring to light certain issues; related to the female, in an androcentric Indian Middle class, and the inner struggle they have to pass through. The novelist, Shashi Deshpande, has tried to unmask the masked emotions of Jaya and other female characters that lie buried in their heart due to patriarchy for centuries. Shashi Deshpande, in the course of the novel, has focused on the substantiality of married life, and its impact on the female in Indian context.

A recipient of prestigious *Sahitya Academy Award* in 1990, and the *Padma Shri Award in 2009* respectively, Shashi Deshpande, is an eminent author of the contemporary Indian literature in English; concentrating, within India, on the life of women belonging to different strata of society. Born in 1936 at Dharwad,

Karnataka in an upper middle class family, Shashi Deshpande was a daughter of the renowned Sanskrit scholar: Sriranga. Her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980)* begins a new era of feminist voice in Indian fiction; by working on the lines of familial relationships. She takes up the complexities of conjugal relationships; especially of the female (wife) belonging to Indian society. Her publications include eleven novels, two crime Novellas, and number of short story collections, a book of essays and four children's books. Shashi Deshpande acknowledges the freedom of women in India is circumscribed by the precinct of class, marital status and social position. Her other novels Roots and Shadows (1983), If I Die Today (1982), and Come up and Be Dead are detective stories. The pivot of Deshpande's works is women's rights, as well as patriarchy; she shows how traditional Indian society is biased and deprives the women of their due rights.

Description: Shashi Deshpande, the writer, in *That Long Silence*, has delineated the character of Jaya; a married woman and a writer, very aptly whose art of writing is repressed by the cruelty of male dominated society; her husband and other male members who are part of her personal life including kaka, dada, appa etc. Jaya, the protagonist cum narrator, driven by her hobby, writes and expresses her emotions whenever she gets a little time out of her busy household routine. Jaya (writer) has not only expressed her own pent –up emotions but also attempts to voice the silence of many female characters who came in her contact directly or indirectly. Women have always been looked down upon by men, since the ages; and are supposed to live within the four walls of their homes having no direct connection with the outside world. Women, in India, had no right to participate, independently, in social, political and religious activities as well as financial matters. The novel, *That Long Silence*, as the title suggests, is a saga (series of events and incidents) of moral and physical atrocities, and the perpetuated injustice on women by their male counterparts besides their mother- in- law, sister-in-law etc. The silence of Kusum, Mukta, Naina, Jeeja, or Tara, as portrayed in the novel, stands for the stifled and muffled behavior of women, at large, in Indian society. Shashi Deshpande, through Jaya, has tried to give the voice to all those women who are part of this suffering. Jaya's hobby is to write the experiences of her personal life; she became a writer by chance, and her husband Mohan; an engineer, is also a part of the narrative. Jaya acknowledges writing about the couple; ' Of Mohan and me.'

Jaya, while writing, exposes her inner self, and the strife she has gone through; mentally and physically. She finds 'self-revelation is a cruel process' and bewildering.. Jaya, a graduate, belongs to the upper middle class, and writes for passion. She writes for a magazine, and her articles are actually the feelings of her tortured soul and the buried desires which a woman cannot express or share with others in real life due to patriarchal psyche. Jaya was just 15 years old when her father died; she was married to Mohan, has two children Rati (daughter) and Rahul(son), she has also had one abortion without the knowledge of her husband Mohan Jaya details her life before and after marriage; penning all these events and incidents with dexterity, that form the part of her reminiscences. Tailored for 'pseudo-puritanism' at home, she was allowed only to hear classical music, and not 'that disgusting mush' songs of Rafi and Lata. This trend of dominance continued, even after marriage, with Mohan; her husband, taking the reins. Mohan used to scold Jaya for her 'poor taste'; her eagerness to watch 'glossy coloured advertising visuals' that are

displayed during the show of movie in a cinema hall. Her incompatibility with Mohan is not unusual. She had to survive with 'the shame' longer than expected, and had to choke her feelings how little they were:

> Those cozy, smiling, happy families in their gleaming homes spelt sheer poetry to me. For me, they were the fairy tales in which people live happily ever after. (Deshpande 3)

Jaya wants to live life to its fullest; as every Indian woman wants, but cannot being a woman. Jaya fantasizes ideal life; her inner grief is less personal but she universalizes it, and weeps internally over the sad demise of other female characters also. Her feminine sensibility is aroused when she holds the pen to write. Her articles, in magazines, strongly exhibit her protest against the rules and conventions imposed on female by the male dominated society. Jaya's husband, Mohan, is an authentic specimen of such species; regulated and governed by patriarchal values. Mohan, 'who disdained the flowerly', is a very practical man merely concerned with his job and his family; the outward social environment does not matter to him.

Jaya compares herself to a 'trodden worm' alluding to her years of submission to her husband since marriage. Jaya refers to an incident of post wedding ceremony in which Jaya and Mohan played a game; searching silver coin in a mound of rice. Jaya had 'deliberately dawdled' while Mohan had 'scrabbled frantically' for the control of the coin. But with that unintentional win, Jaya's journey of toil has started to maintain 'a delicately balanced relationship'. Since then, she calls this bondage 'a pair of bullocks yoked together': the bullocks being Jaya and Mohan, for the last seventeen years. They were supposed to share each moment of their pains and pleasures. She critically evaluates the 'clever phrase': a pair of bullocks; a man and a woman, yoked together, providing precedence to male over female.

Mohan presents himself to be an ideal: a dutiful son, a dutiful father, husband and a brother, though 'he carries within himself this own scars of guilt, remorse and resentment.' He idealizes himself as and when he gets the opportunity to do so. At an occasion, he tries to showcase himself loyal to the family, and recounts the sacrifices that he has been doing all over his life:

> 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. (Deshpande 3)

Jaya had endured all this 'with a faint sense of bewilderment' until then. Mohan mistook 'her silence for accusation' in the ongoing inquiry. Tough Jaya is totally unconcerned with 'contracts, tenders, favours, commissions…', yet Mohan deflects his blame on her for the whole affair. It has always been the habit of the male to blame the female; it seems as if family is the responsibility of them only. Jaya accepts the hard fact, and finds it impossible 'to go to extremes' without the consent of her husband; a tradition commonly followed in a patriarchal society where women are not allowed to express their thoughts. Mohan decides to shift to Dadar flat, in such an embarrassing situation, to escape public shame. Mohan's unilateral decision: implying Jaya's 'acquiescence', reflects his masculinity and authoritative attitude. Jaya's opinion does not matter to him; she is supposed to follow

his decision, with full loyalty and truthfulness, alike Sita and Savitri, the mythological characters who 'move in the same direction.'

> So had I. Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband' travails……. (Deshpande 11)

The women has been cooperating men since the ages, but even then their views in family matters do not matter. Though modern, educated and aware of her rights, Jaya could not oppose Mohan's decision to move to Dadar flat; however she is upset. A wave of memories arouses in her mind like sea waves; the thread of recollections takes her back to the days when she was newlywed. Jaya was rechristened, by Mohan, as Suhasini: 'a house proud woman.' Appa had chosen 'Jaya' for her on the day of her birth; 'Jaya for victory.' The name: Suhasini, never suited her, as Kamat; an elderly neighbor and a widower, appreciates Jaya for her name as it suits her face.

> And I was Jaya. But I had been Suhasini as well. I can see her now, the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped. (Deshpande 15)

The fate of Indian women, as Jaya opinions, is not just to 'stay at home, look after their babies, and keep out the rest of the world, and you are safe.' She nourished Kusum; Jaya's Vanitamami's niece, when her family deserted her for depression bouts. Jaya did it with 'tenacity'; despite Mohan's reluctance, consulted doctor for Kusum, tried to dissuade her from going back 'home to die.' Jaya never considered Kusum a burden, and an unwanted responsibility, though, she is very much aware of her own children' welfare.

> As if Kusum was a raving maniac, out to destroy my children, instead of being a poor, frightened, defeated woman, whose urge for destruction had been turned inwards. (Deshpande 20)

Kusum's death is 'a sociological phenomenon'; an order of the society: preference for son, fewer and lesser opportunities even for talented and brilliant girls. Her affection and motherhood carried her back to home, and ultimately to her death in a 'well' where 'the springs had dried up.' Who is responsible for Kusum's death? Her parents, her in-laws, she herself, and the society at large; the combined four, colluded to end her life. Shashi Deshpande, very vividly and accurately, denounces such stereotypical role of Indian daughter or wife; rather she tries to expose the dual attitude of our society. Kusum's death has awakened Jaya; both mentally and emotionally, and the dichotomy of being worshiped and pushed for suicide.

> As long as Kusum was there, I had known clearly who I was; it had been kusum who had shown me out to be who I was. I-was not Kusum. Now-with Kusum dead…….? (Deshpande 24)

Mohan's dismissal from job, on corruption charges, had bestowed freedom on Jaya by putting her 'own career as wife in jeopardy.' Nothingness crept into their life where she 'had a queer sense of homecoming…..had gone back to the days' of her early childhood. She had been stripped off from the stereotypical role of a house wife:

> I was free, after years, of all those monsters that had ruled my life, gadgets that has to be kept in order, the glassware that had to sparkle, the furniture and curtains that had to be kept spotless and dust free, and those clothes, God all those never ending piles of clothes that had to be washed and ironed, so that they could be worn and washed and ironed once again. (Deshpande 25)

Jaya's role as a member of family, as a wife is quite clear, and Mohan's as a husband, the difference of their positions is also quite clear; 'the truth is that it was Mohan who had a clear idea of what he wanted, the kind of life he wanted to lead, the kind of home he would live in, and I went along with him.' (P 25) It is the duty of all women to follow their husbands, to live with them in any type of condition, to decorate themselves according to their husbands; this also happens to Jaya. After a case is registered against Mohan, he decides to pass some period of time in the Dadar flat, the decision is his own without the consent of Jaya.

Jaya's reminiscences of early childhood includes Aiji (her Dadi), a shaven widow, deprived of luxurious life, with scarcely possessions; two saris, forced to sleep on a straw mat while her husband: Jaya's grandfather, is a reverend figure even after his death; his bed has been kept intact, and chairs are meant only for the male to sit on them. Such atrocities, against women, regardless of their age, had transuded in every strata of society. Jaya, through Nayna; a pregnant housemaid at flat, highlights the miserable condition of woman. Nayna calls her husband, brother and father 'good for nothing'; all drunkard. She is well aware of very precarious position of woman in society, and is reluctant to bear a girl child 'who will only suffer because of men all her life.'

Girls or women are trained, from the very beginning, in such a way that submission becomes their usual nature. The games, they play in childhood, are also of the same nature as 'house-keeping'; It is not only Jaya who waits, but all Indian women have to wait till their death; whether educated like Jaya or household maids like Naiyna.

> 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. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for the children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch-carrier man.... (Deshpande 30)

This 'waiting' ends with Mohan's suspension; 'no more waiting, no more apprehension, no more fears' as far as Jaya is concerned. Mohan, her husband, the 'sheltering tree' wants to escape, the embarrassing situation: the suspension on charges of corruption, in which he has put himself; he seeks Jaya's opinion who doesn't want 'to water' the tree 'with deceit and lies' chose to keep mum recollecting Vanithamami's advice, though she carries 'on the burden of being a partner in the crime, an ally' being his better half.

> Without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable, this followed logically. And so you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies. (Deshpande 32)

A woman, in our society, sacrifices herself for the sake of her family; helps her husband at each step whether the situation is difficult or joyful; she is given no recognition for her cooperation. It is the habit of women to take care of everyone in the family with devotion and whole heartedly; they forget even their own pains and worries and die for them. Jaya recalls how Mohan is the exact copy of his father, who was proud and authoritative; while his mother was submissive like all ladies. Mohan also shares many incidents of his past life with Jaya: Mohan's father's habit of coming home late during night in drunken position, then his demands of fresh meal was fulfilled by cooking 'rice for him again' as he had 'made it clear to her' that he was not going to eat 'what he called' her 'children's disgusting leavings.' A slight mumbling from her side results into 'picking up his heavy brass plate and threw it, not at her, but deliberately at the wall.' A woman, 'in those days' had to undergo 'a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender.'

However, Vimla (Mohan's sister) is quite different from her mother, she is married but has no children 'five years married now- I performed my fifth Mangla- Gouri puja this year- and I have no children.' (P, 37) Her Mother died during abortion when she was pregnant for the last time 'she didn't want that last child, she'd lost four or five babies by then, and she was desperate. But then I was only a girl, and her behaviour that day frightened me.' Vimla, being immature, at that time both physically and mentally, had to do her household duties; she is forced to do it, she fears to be taken away from school and leave studies; that was what happened to Prema after Sudha was born. It happens not only to Vimla, but it is the fate of all girls in India in most families. After marriage, Vimla's mother-in-law does not want to keep her with them, she had an ovarian tumour and she is even not taken to hospital either by her husband or parents; her in laws believe:

> I never heard of women going to hospitals and doctors for such a thing. As if other women don't have heavy periods. What a fuss. But these women who've never had children. (Deshpande 39)

Vimla dies of cancer, she never disclosed to anyone about it; she kept it to herself in silence 'sank into coma and died a week later, her silence intact.' Vimla suffered for not having children, while her mother suffered for having too much; both of them go through pain and then death. Jaya, in the course of her narrative, reflects that poor housemaids like Nayna and Jeeja are more aware of their rights in comparison to other ladies, and even she herself. Jeeja warns Jaya 'don't give my husband any of my pay'; in the beginning, she came to work 'bruised and hurt' and it was almost a routine with her. On the other hand, her husband has 'other woman' in his life, but she is not angry with anyone; not even with her parents for having married to a drunkard. Jaya feels that the fate of women is the same to whichever class they belong:

> All those happy women with husbands in good jobs, men who didn't drink and beat their wives, those fortunate women whose Kitchen shelves gleamed with brass and stainless steel vessels- they

> were of no use to me. It was jeeja and her like I needed; it were these women who saved me from the hell of drudgery. Any little freedom I had depended on them. (Deshpande 52)

Jeeja, Nayna, Tara etc. belong to that category of ladies in whom Jaya finds the source of inspiration for freedom, and the dare to protest that she must show towards her husband, and other males who are part of her life viz Kamat. Tara, is another lady (Jeeja's daughter in law and wife of Rajaram) also shows true courage; she is not reserved but of revolutionary nature, always curses her drunkard, good for nothing husband: 'so many drunkards die, she cried, but this one won't. He'll torture us all to death.' (P 53)

While Jeeja, Tara's mother in law, reprimands her for her outspoken behaviour and sternly shuts her up: 'stop that, don't forget, he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?' (P 53) Tara's husband beats her, in case, she does not give him money to drink, and her mother in law scolds her if she gives.

These realities, of life, hover in Jaya's memory, she gives the shape of words to these reminiscences and bring to the knowledge of the society at large. Mukta, Jaya's neighbor of the Dadar flat without whom our study is incomplete, whom Jaya calls 'poor Mukta', is a widow, and at the time of death of her husband, she was pregnant; she performs fasts as a ritual of her widowhood most of the days, a kind of 'self mortification' of a Hindu woman. Nilima, Mukta's daughter, considers her mother 'really horribly old-fashioned' and exhorts her to 'give them' all those 'stupid' fasts. Mukta, when her husband was alive, was a good dancer. Jaya recollects her to be as a dancer, standing still, while Mukta feels lonely as well as alienated, in the crowd of people who surround her in society; her grief is unending. She is battling with orthodox conventions, rituals, loneliness and widowhood; she is educated but cannot escape from the age old conventions.

However, Nilima, her daughter, is frail by structure, dark complexioned but bold and frank; she dislikes her mother for following age old rituals being a widow. She wants to live life to its fullest; she can discuss about menstruation with Jaya, without any hesitation:

> It's so horrible auntie, she had cried out to me once. I don't want it, why can't I stop having it? Isn't there any drug I can take to stop it. (Deshpande 63)

Jaya, the duty bound wife, never dares to question her husband regarding his job, his work and his dealings. She regards herself, her loyalty towards her husband, as an embodiment of Gandhari of Mahabharata in, and becomes a mythical figure:

> If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I didn't want to know anything. (Deshpande 61)

Earlier, Jaya was content to be a wife happy, not wishing immortality, just with children going to 'good schools' and 'decent clothes, a fridge, a gas connection, travel ling first class'. However, their disagreement on certain issues, fueled quarrels between Mohan and Jaya. Mohan does not like her imaginative nature, she writes

stories for a magazine 'Woman's World' about under column 'Seeta.' Mohan, who takes the credit of introducing her to the outside world, accuses her; out of rage, of being careless towards children, and fabricating a gap between them. Jaya weeps in silence, though committed to maintain the sacred thread in which they two are bound together: the marriage. The publication of a award winning story, written by Jaya, creates ripples in their bond. Mohan misconstrues the story to their personal life:

. 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. (Deshpande 143)

Mohan rebukes Jaya for being realistic; he mistook the words of Jaya, he has no access to her emotions, her inner self. He feels as if she has wounded him. She bids goodbye to her writing career but only for a short duration, she starts writing again after meeting Kamat but with a pseudonym.

Conclusion- *That Long Silence* narrates the saga of a struggle of Indian women who belong to middle class to lower class; these women are struggling to get emancipation from orthodox and stereotypical role of female in our society. They are actually trying to recognize their own voice in a patriarchal society; the era of struggle has almost come to an end. Now women are working with men in every field, getting higher education, and they are capable of raising their voice against the vices, injustice and unilateral dominancy. No doubt, there are exceptions, but on the whole the chains and the boulders of their way are being shattered. Jaya, in the novel also, is ready to accept Mohan back in her life emotionally, it is a big transformation that comes in her life. Shashi Deshpande, through Jaya: the protagonist, depicts that the era of struggle is over now, and a new concept of empowered, rational and modern woman is emerging that repudiates to yield to the dominant forces, though herself caught in the whirl of personal tragedy, and faces the challenges of life with utmost courage and robustness.

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