

CHAPTER - IV

THAT LONG SILENCE

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That Long Silence is first major novel of Shashi Deshpande published abroad in the year 1988. In a sense, it is her best novel so far as for treatment of middle-class intellectual woman to establish her individual identity is concerned.

As Adele King comments on the novel:

"That Long Silence is, Deshpande's finest novel so far because it analyses emotion within rather unexceptional situations and because it creates more detailed pictures: of an extended family with its odd misfits, its petty bickering over money, its jealousy over affections, and of a marriage in which there is no right or wrong."¹

Another perceptive critic Sarabjit Sandhu has this to say about the new novel:

"That Long Silence, is not a autobiography, except for certain parts dealing with the frustrations of an unsuccessful writer. Sashi Deshpande has presented an Indian woman as she is

in India of the eighties and not as she should be."²

That Long Silence, deals with the life and predicament of a woman writer such as Sashi Deshpande herself is. It deals with the heroine Jaya a sort of writer who has failed to have her writings published, and, hence, her life, as it was, has been 'that long silence'. Shashi Deshpande narrates the mysteries and frustrations of this long silence in this novel.

At the beginning of the novel, we find Jaya and her husband shifting from their well-settled comfortable house to their old house in Dadar. This is the old house, where Jaya had come soon after her marriage with her husband. In those days their financial condition was not good. As the novel begins Mohan is caught in some malpractice (accepting bribes and approving substandard engineering contracts) and is forced to escape from the scene as the inquiry is in progress. Consequently, this shifting to the old house upsets Jaya totally and makes her an introvert. As there is nothing serious to do she goes on brooding over her past life. She remembers the preachings of her father such as 'a husband is like a sheltering tree'.(32). In other words, she has been from the childhood, under the influence of the traditional ideal of womanhood.

Shashi Deshpande seems to suggest that howsoever an Indian woman is educated and influenced by modern thoughts, she will nevertheless try to identify herself with the image of an ideal mythological character. Thus Jaya, though she is well educated and influenced by modern thoughts tries to compare herself with Seeta and Draupadi. Jaya behaves according to her husband's wishes because she wants to maintain harmony in the family. She finds that any adverse comments on her husband or anything against her husband results in frustration. Many times her comments on Mohan are dismissed by him as 'writer's imagination' and nothing more.

An Indian women's role made is predetermined. She is either a dutiful daughter, obedient wife or loving mother. Her home and her family are her main concerns. She has no other function either at home or in society. In other words, she has no separate individuality to be a non-conformist in any way. As an example, in the case of Jaya, we find that her names are also not her own. They go on changing. 'Her name keeps on changing accordingly to the wishes of others.' (37). As Sarabjit Sandhu has rightly pointed out :

"The writer has presented this phenomenon through a character Jaya who

is known by two names: Jaya and Suhasini. Jaya which means victory, is the name given by her father when she was born and Suhasini, the name given after her marriage which means a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman."³

These two names symbolize two aspect of the same personality. The former 'Jaya' symbolizes victory, the desire of her father and the later 'Suhasini' represents her husband's expectation from her, that is the flattering submission.

Jaya's dream of an ideal husband has shattered by the environment and surroundings and above all by the society which imposes all sorts of restrictions on women. For instance, she discovers that her husband talks about women who are treated cruelly by their husbands and he calls this cruelty a 'strength', but in the case of women 'he saw strength in the woman sitting silently in fornt of the fire' ..whereas, as Jaya says, 'but I saw despair, I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence is the only weapon. Silence and surrender.' ..(p.36)

Her sexual life experience is equally frustrating. To the dominating role of her husband, hers is that of supporting and suffering. The relationship is not

spontaneous; and so her husband always asks her self-consciously whether he has hurt her; but she cannot answer him with a 'yes'. All this is suggested by the author in flashback and with the help of stream of consciousness technique.

As Sarabjit Sandhu has rightly said:

"at times the author uses the technique of stream of consciousness to project the minds of the characters, and thus making the story authentic and realistic."⁴

Jaya's husband expects her to share his guilt of malpractices in his business, and endure it and thus support him fully. She seems to tolerate this believing:

'both are yoked together, so better to go to the same direction, as to go to different directions will be painful.' ..(p.10)

Her husband is a typical male-chauvinistic pig who fears that any writing by his wife about man-woman relationship will betray their own disharmonious married life, and what effect it will have on his image in society. She cannot even express her anger since her husband believes

that anger makes a woman 'unwomanly' (83). Sarabjit Sanghu rightly comments:

"social conformity has always been more obligatory for a woman than for a man. Generally, a woman's identity tends to be defined by others."⁵

Jaya is obliged to much conform to the expectation of her husband even to the extent of depriving what is or is not 'unwomanly'. As Jaya is a writer of sorts - that is 'silent' - the matter of communication becomes important. Since her husband desires 'silent submission' on her part, there is a total break-down of communication between the two. In the Indian situation, this is not quite new.

Veena Sheshadri explain this predicament of the heroine in the following words:

"Why has the author choosen a 'heroine' who only succeeds in evolving waves of irritation in the reader? Perhaps it is because a competent writer like her is never satisfied unless she is tackling new challenges. Also, she believes in presenting life as it is and not as it should be, and there must be thousands of self-centered women

like Jaya, perennially griping about their fate, but unwilling to do anything that could result in their being tossed out of their comfortable ruts and into the big, bad world of reality to find for themselves."⁶

There is a difference between the out-look of Jaya and Mohan (one modern woman rooted in tradition and other traditionist rooted in customs) and they fail to understand each other and this difference in attitude makes them to lead a shaky and gloomy marital life. It appears as though they have the fear of society and hence they are obliged to compromise their attitudes in their life.

There is no conversation between them. She is frustrated because of this unhappiness which reflects not only in her conjugal life but also in social life. There is neither anger nor emotions expressed in her writings. Her writings are rejected by the publishers. On the one hand she feels that she has failed in her duty as a wife and on the other, she feels that she has been neglected by her husband when he leaves the house without informing her. Consequently there is no communication between them. In other words, the novel is really about the possibility of articulation in a literary format one's own grievances - a

fact which depends not only upon possessing literacy, but upon traditional and cultural limitations. Jaya is a failed writer not for nothing. It is her inability to come out openly in verbal construct - that is the theme of the novel. This is evident when she utters,

"I racked my brains trying to think of an answer"

but she must keep mute and dumb.

Veena Sheshadri significantly comments:

"one ends up by wondering whether Jaya has imposed the long silence on herself not out of a sense of duty or to emulate the ideal Hindu woman of the ages gone by, but in order to comouflage the streaks of ugliness within her."⁷

She has the habit of discerning and analyzing each and every situation in life which creates havoc in her personal life. Again there is a struggle between prudence and ignorance as her prudence does not allow her to submit before ignorance. Somehow she wants to have a balanced conjugal life. As Sarabjit Sandhu writes:

"In order to have well balanced conjugal life, it is imperative that husband and

wife be at par with each other. They should supplement and not supplant each other. Further, they should know each other well physically as well as emotionally. It is this harsh reality that Deshpande tries to project through the female protagonist who, at the end, chooses to break her long silence of the past."⁸

It is not only silence of Jaya that is highlighted but also the silence of other characters in the novel - for example: Mohan's mother, Jaya's servant, Jaya's mentally ~~distur~~bed cousin Kusum.

Deshpande's strength lies in portraying the uncertainties and doubts of women who cannot see themselves as heroic and yet who want to make life 'possible'.

Thus Sarabjit Sandhu remarks:

"Deshpande has presented not a woman who revolts openly in the beginning and later on reconciles to the situation, but a kind of woman who wants to revolt, but ultimately does not. Her inner turmoils are so bitter that she is unable to speak them out and remains

silent in order, not to be frustrated and disappointed after the disapproval of her actions by the society. She is unable to unfold the truth. Her image becomes like that of a bird who has got wings and knows that it can fly, but somehow, does not. In the same way Jaya is aware of her abilities and she knows that she can expose them openly, but somehow, she does not. She always remains silent which indicates that the traditional roles of women still have primacy over all the newly-acquired professional roles."⁹

As in other novels, Sashi Deshpande makes use of the First Person narrator in this novel also. It seems that this device is handy to narrate the interior underscope of the female mind and evoke a sort of empathy for the central character.

The novel has received good reviews. "The British Press, with the venerable Time Literary Supplement, says 'The novel's strength lies in its compassion, its tolerance and understanding of human relationships' and the 'Guardian' in a more patronising write-up, saying "India is a massively complex society. Everything happens to women and it is the internal world of women enduring their loud macho marriages that Mrs. Deshpande is monitoring."¹⁰

NOTES AND REFERENCES

All references to the text of The Long Silence are from the first edition published in 1988, London: Virago.

1. Adele King. Shashi Deshpande: Portraits of an Indian Women. The New Indian Novel in English, A Study of the 1980's. p.165.
2. Sandhu Sarabjit. The Novels of Shashi Deshpande. p.40.
3. Ibid, p.37.
4. Ibid, p.38.
5. Ibid, p.39.
6. Veena Sheshadri. That Long Silence. Literature Alive, II, I -1988 p.94.
7. Ibid, p.94.
8. Sandhu Sarabjit. The Novels of Shashi Deshpande. p.42.
9. Ibid, p.43.
10. Shekar Ratna Rao. Society. Dec.,1989 - p.464.

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