

Identity Crisis in Shashi Deshpande's Novel *That Long Silence*

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the problem of identity crisis of female protagonist Jaya in the novel, *That long silence* and it reveals the intriguing picture of ordinary middle class educated women Jaya who is trapped in the institution of marriage. Throughout the story the female protagonist Jaya is searching for her own identity. Jaya lives with her husband and two children Rahul and Rati. Her life revolves around them. She plays different roles in her life-that of a dutiful wife, an obedient daughter-in-law and an affectionate mother. She submits herself to patriarchy. But in fulfilling her duties and responsibilities her true self is lost. In the novel she tries to search her identify. She confronts a situation where she questions her role clarity-her life-is she living for her or for someone else or for her husband or for her children. This paper specially focuses on the issue of identity crisis in *That Long Silence*.

KEYWORDS:

Patriarchy; Identity; Marriage.

Shashi Deshpande has occupied a prominent place among Indian Women writers in English. She portrays modern, educated and career-oriented middle class women who are sensitive to the changing time and situations. They are aware of the social and cultural disabilities to which they are subjected in the male-dominated society. They want to rebel against them in their search for freedom and identity, but they find themselves up against well-entrenched social inertia. She finds them caught up in a conflict between their family and professional roles, between individual aspiration and social demands. A glimpse of her novels reveals how poignantly she expresses the frustration and disappointments of women experience social and cultural oppression in the male-dominated society. Through her novel she brings forth the problem of identity crisis

which is predominant motif in modern Indian society.

That Long silence is an acclaimed novel by Shashi Deshpande, published in Britain by Virago, has won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award and it has been translated into the French and the Dutch languages. The novel is based in the context of contemporary Indian writing in English. Shashi Deshpande explores the universal and individual predicament through the female psyche. The novel *That Long Silence* tells a haunting tale of how Jaya is disillusioned with her marriage and her life, rediscover herself. It is a complex story about a woman who rediscovers herself after seventeen years of marriage and comes to term with her failure as a writer. Deshpande uses this story to paint vividly how the life of a woman like Jaya is. She says that the life of woman is confined

within the boundaries of her husband's home. She must stay at home, look after her babies, keep out of the rest of the world, and then only she is safe. Jaya's life was happy one as she had a happy family, her husband was in a top position, they had two children-one boy and one girl and she was yet another wife and mother whose life centered around her family and her home. The novel conveys the confusion, disappointment and subjugation of middle class educated Indian women.

The issue of identity crisis is strongly rooted and integrated in Indian consciousness since ages in spite of the fact that Indian women did enjoy equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. The behavioral pattern of females in India can be traced to the ancient days. It is said that "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a women must never be independent." In this context Simon de Beauvoir's argument of 'The Second Sex' is quite appropriate. Women have never shared the world equally with men for they are dependent on men, which are not a natural or biological characteristic, but forced upon them by social tradition through their conditioning.

Jaya's character in this novel is a magnificent creation. Jaya is a middle class educated woman, born and brought up in a family with liberal views. After marriage she becomes the part of a typical Indian conservative middle class family where the wife is known by her husband. Just before she had got married to Mohan, her aunt had told her, "Remember Jaya, husband is like a sheltering tree." After marriage she has given up her individuality and molded herself to suit the needs of Mohan's family. Her identity is that she is Mohan's wife. She is Rahul's and Rati's mother. She was a writer who had given up serious writing, and had taken up writing a weekly column on Seeta. Deshpande's Jaya is mute spectator to whatever is persistent in the

Indian society. She doesn't have the habit of questioning rather she is not allowed to pose questions in a male dominated society. Mohan was an ambitious person He did not have time for Jaya as he was busy realizing his dreams. He was an Indian husband who cared very little about her likes and dislikes. He did not understand his wife as a person. Marriage has changed Jaya and it has resulted in the death of Jaya as a writer. Jaya once wrote a story about a couple, about a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. Her story won a prize in a magazine. Mohan was upset that people might think the couple was them, that the man was him. Jaya thought that she did him wrong. And she stopped writing after that. She thus kills the writer within her. Jaya's search of identity brings when Mohan is under suspicion of having done something dishonest. Both of them leave their posh church gate home and enter the simple Dadar flat of Jaya's uncle. She takes the first step towards this reawakening by taking the key of the flat and opening the door herself. It is at that moment that Mohan's authority is shaken and Jaya starts reassuring control over herself and her life.

Jaya begins analyzing her life in a new situation. She knows in her heart that her marriage is almost over. After a fight, Mohan leaves that flat and walks out. Jaya becomes miserable and ultimately falls sick. She is taken care of by her neighbor Mukta, Mukta's daughter Nilima and the servant girl, Manda. It is through writing that she is able to cope up with the situation. Her life is meaningless without her Mohan. Ruminating on the past, Jaya sees how her marriage has reduced her to a mere automation. She realizes how she washed away the most valuable time of her life in arranging and re-arranging things, dusting, polishing, washing, ironing, cleaning the fridge and changing the sheets. She is bewildered to find in her diaries that she had spent her life engrossed in such trivialities as what she

bought, how much she paid for it, the dates the children's schools had begun, the servant's absence, the advance they had taken, etc.

Jaya, as a girl, was taught by her father to have confidence in herself. He named her Jaya which stands for Victory and has encouraged her to be resilient and courageous. He has made her feel that she is someone special and someone different from the other girls whose world normally ends up becoming housewives. He would dream that Jaya either bags an international award or goes to Oxford. However, his untimely 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. There is no comfortable relationship. Her early training at home has made her obedient and submissive towards her husband. Her relatives taught her the importance of being with a husband and husband is like a sheltering tree and without the tree, the wife is dangerously unprotected and vulnerable. Jaya proceeds to "keep the tree alive and flourishing even if you have to water it with deceit and lies". Jaya since her childhood has designed her life in according to her family member's desires. She marries Mohan not out of choice but out of convenience. He is from same caste, decent, good looking and has a good job. Jaya has no reason to reject him. As a girl Jaya is not very practical and she romanticizes love. But when she grows up into a young woman, circumstances make her look at marriage practically, not romantically. Generally, a woman's identity is defined in terms of her relationship with man as a daughter, a wife and a mother. It means virtually a woman doesn't have an identity of her own. In keeping with the ritual of re-naming the bride on the wedding day as in some Brahmin communities, Jaya also has been renamed as 'Suhasini' by Mohan. 'Suhasini' means a soft, smiling placid, motherly woman, who makes herself

loving and also lovingly nurtures her family. With this new name, it appears that the light-spirited and courageous Jaya has been reduced to a mere proud housewife and mother. Jaya wants to retain her own name given by her father meaning victory. Her refusal to adopt the name 'Suhasini' becomes manifestation of resistance to the Indian society. However, Jaya's rejection of the name 'Suhasini' now remains as a token of victory as she cannot afford to insist on for long as she has been thought to regard her husband as a tree of projector and so represses her anger and resentment.

The loveless married life which causes the wife and the husband to drift away from each other results in total failure. By implication, the character of Jaya represent modern woman's ambivalent attitude to married life. It is only by negating her own personality that a woman who is powerless in the patriarchal order and society. Jaya in order to maintain her marriage as a happy one, slowly transforms herself to this ideal of womanhood, where she learns to repress her anger. Jaya always works up to please her husband. Jaya even transforms her appearance to suit his idea of a modern woman-cuts her hair and wears dark glasses. She ultimately gets so completely absorbed into the family fold that from a fiercely independent woman, she is transformed into the stereotype of a woman. Jaya desperately clings to her husband as if her life depends on him. Jaya's story, in the larger context, is the story of generations of women. She does not wish to look outside; she wants to be safe looking after her husband and children. The outside world has so far not affected her life though at times she feels dissatisfied with her life. The relationship between a wife and husband is expected to be not only cordial but intimate and enduring. But this relation between Jaya and Mohan is an epitome of failure and an emblem of disgust, disappointment and depression. This is so because there was no

love between them. This disgust of living with a man who does not love the woman the way she expects him-is a burning problem the educated woman has to face in the contemporary society. Marriage in India means marrying the husband's family traditions. The psychological and social realities in which women live have remained virtually unchanged. Jaya makes a powerful statement on the totally unfair system prevailing in our society of the subjugation of women. As she realizes, it is fear on the part of woman that has allowed the subjugation to continue. Women need not succumb and assume the roles cast upon them. She says, "...in this life itself there are so many cross roads, women have allowed victimization instead of bargaining for partnership".

Jaya understands that she has also contributed to her victimization and that she has to fight her own battle and work out her own solution. Accordingly she feels the necessity to break the silence, articulate her predicament, and establish her identity. She knows that there is always room for discussion and compromise. It is not the fault of men alone that has caused the feminine discontent. A patriarchal

order can be subverted if only women take their armour in the order of intelligencer and individuality. She decides that she will live from now onward without sacrificing her identity or individuality. She will make adjustment but it will not be a servile one. Her giving up writing for the newspaper column 'Seeta' symbolizes giving up her traditional role-model of wife, now she will write what she wants to write and will not look up at Mohan's face for an answer she wants. To write and will not look up at Mohan's face for an answer she wants. This makes her voyage of discovery complete. She decides to break the ice between her and Mohan. She marches ahead with renewed energy. According to Jaya discovering one's self does not mean to stand aloof from the rest of the world

The solution to problems within relationships does not lie in walking away from them, but rather in rebuilding the relationships in such a way as to give little place for problems to crop up. *That Long Silence* therefore, constitutes an outstanding contribution to Indian literature in English with the exploration of identity crisis on the perspective of Jaya.

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