

Research Article

Breaking “Silence” and Bridging Marital Bonds through Introspection, Assertion and ‘Calculated Reconciliation’: A Postmodernist Feminist Critique of Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

The paper attempts to evaluate the postmodernist feminist discourse, though un-avowed, of Shashi Deshpande for the cause of Woman. It engages to unravel Shashi Deshpande’s reflection of imbibing the spirit of postmodernism of negating essentialism, challenging certainties induced by dominant discourses of history and patriarchal culture and celebrating individual’s right and perhaps duty of subjectivity and freedom, through the woman protagonist, Jaya of *That Long Silence*. The paper traces the voyaging of the not-so-unassuming woman-protagonist’s life journey initially entangled in the web of marital and familial relations and Indian socio-cultural traditions and finally emerging out of it, fortified by chastened personality and optimism. Also, the paper unveils the means of introspection, assertion and ‘calculated reconciliation’ adopted by the postmodernist woman protagonist, Jaya to attempt to salvage her marriage from the ruins, while not compromising over her individuality, freedom and self-fulfillment but with due empathy for her marital counterpart.

Keywords: Postmodernist Feminism, Postmodernist-Woman-Protagonist, Introspection, Assertion and Calculated Reconciliation.

What soon became labeled as postmodernism challenged the survival of modernism by contesting its claims to universality: its trans-historical assertions of value were no longer seen as based—as claimed—on reason or logic, but rather on a solid alliance with power... (Linda Hutcheon in *A Postmodernist Poetics*)

While sighting and/or superimposing of feminist concerns on Shashi Deshpande (since she never avowedly claimed that she is a feminist) and exploring the same in the fictional world of Shashi Deshpande, it is worthwhile to recall what she famously said about the dangers of straightaway importing of western feminism in an interview: “Feminism is not a matter of theory. It is difficult to apply Kate Millett or Simone de Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our daily lives in India. And then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children or about not being married, not having children etc. I always try to make the point now about what feminism is not, and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences. And I actually feel a lot of women in India are feminists without realizing it. (Reddy: 31)

However, notwithstanding the above disclaimer on the part of Shashi Deshpande, it is worthwhile recalling what Lyotard stated about the difficulty of approximating the nature of postmodernist writings: "A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. (81)"

While giving due consideration for the ever-becoming nature of a postmodernist work which defies precise definitions, it is equally worthwhile taking support and/ or shelter in the under current seminal aspect of not being solely monitored by the author's intention or biography but by the individual reader's perceptions as avowed by Roland Barthes in his "*The Death of the Author*," the present critical exploration takes the prop of feminist postmodernism to decipher the woman protagonist Jaya's combat with her deep-rooted silence in *That Long Silence*. The closing of the narrative of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* clinches the feminist postmodernist woman protagonist's attempt to take control of her life, emerging out of the grueling and culminating process of candid Introspection, Assertion (of individuality) and 'Calculated Reconciliation':

"If I have to plug that 'hole in the heart,' I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us. While studying drama, I'd learnt with a sense of outrage that its rigid rules did not permit women characters to speak Sanskrit. They had to use Prakrit – a language that had sounded to my ears like a baby's lisp. The anger I'd felt then comes back to me when I realize that I have been doing all these years. I have been speaking Prakrit myself. ... But why am I making myself the heroine of this story? Why do I presume that the understanding is mine alone? Isn't it possible Mohan too means something more by 'all well' than going back to where we were?" (Deshpande: 192-193: *Subsequent references are to this edition and parenthetically incorporated.*)

Thus, in a way, the postmodernist woman protagonist, Jaya of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* represents the spirit of postmodernism of undertaking ruthless yet dispassionate interrogation and introspection for encountering the "silence" in her marriage which has induced the near-breakdown of her marriage. This mindset helps Jaya to confront the stasis in her marriage and to problematize the same through introspection and candidly recalling where things went wrong. To reiterate, she realizes the perils of her silence and as a way out of this she attempts to assert her individuality and consequently decides to make amends in her relationship with her husband by way of making a 'calculated reconciliation.'

The novel, *That Long Silence*, chronicles the lackluster middle class married life of Jaya and Mohan. In other words Jaya, represents the married life of an educated middle-class Indian woman stranded in the patriarchal suffocating hold. Having borne the yoke of the marriage perhaps for a too long time in "silence," Jaya realizes the *modus operandi* followed by her to gain and retain the image of "ideal wife": "I had learnt it at last—no questions, no retorts, only silence"(143).

The narrative, divided into four parts, told in the first person in a non-linear manner, which reflects the shifting mindscape of the protagonist, Jaya. Through the crisscross narrative, wherein an umpteen characters, the kith and kin and the domestic helps surface and interact, chronicles the woman protagonist's life journey through childhood and youthful stage and her marriage with Mohan and her married life with two children until a setback in Mohan's professional life seems to have jolted her from her simulated placidness and non-committal way of life, in a way which makes the family to take shelter in their Dadar flat of Bombay. Jaya aptly and metaphorically visualizes their condemned state of togetherness: "Two bullocks yoked together—that was how I saw the two of us the day we came here, Mohan and I ..." (191)

Having arrived at the near dead-end predicament in her married life and finding herself in a bewildering state of affairs bordering on neurosis, she takes resort to make self-introspection. The protagonist aptly describes her agonizing condition: "Self-revelation is a cruel process." (1)

Perhaps the strength of Jaya, notwithstanding the traditional hurdles she faces and experiences, one can find her being serious about her determination to find the roots of the malaise, and accordingly she dissects herself and makes an exploration of self and her married life, and realizes that: "Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have snipped of bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel." (7)

In the process of self-exploration and revisiting her past, the protagonist does more than looking inwards, and unveils before us the arena of Indian socio-cultural-religious and philosophical context and its suffocating grip over man and woman. Imbued by this spirit, Jaya scans her personal life and vicariously the entire Indian society and the institution of marriage with patriarchal overpowering a woman's marriage and how a man could cheekily 'choose' and demand a cultured wife wherein he might not be possessing similar qualities and even need not expect to possess the same: "Cultured! Damn, damn. Dada, I can't possibly marry a man who uses that word. Call it off, I mean take it back, withdraw it." (82)

Jaya's rejection, though feebly expressed, manifests the rejection of workings of Gender in a patterned manner with a view to making the gendering as a natural process. Thus the deviousness of Gender is aptly realized by Jaya which in a way echoes Judith Butler's unraveling of the authoritative systemization of individuals by the Gender: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." (43)

Her ironic and scathing comment on her married life, perhaps at times, is reflective at least to some extent, of the traditional Indian marriage: "The truth is simpler. Two bullocks yoked together ... it is more comfortable for them to move together." (pp. 11-12). Needless to emphasize that beneath this critical and/or self-critical satirizing, one could witness her agony over the stasis and her desire to come out of it and to become a better woman and an expectation of finding her husband, Mohan, as a better man.

But she knows that it is not so simple to rise to that level of liberation and betterment. To attain that level she has to undergo a grueling and candid verification of her conjugal life, and the mechanical pattern of physical union that has always prevailed. Hence she recalls how monotonous and unromantic the physical unions: "We had never came together, only our bodies had done that." (98). The worse is also put forward by Jaya without mincing words: "God, how terrible it was to know a man so well." (85)

The postmodernist feminist discourse of Shashi Deshpande seems to have gained voice in challenging platitudes about the so much taken for granted naturalness of Man-Woman relationship that seems to have emanated from none other than an economic philosopher, like, Karl Marx: "The relation of man to woman is most natural, one person to another. Karl Marx—yes, Karl Marx it was who'd said that. Natural? ... There's only treachery, only deceit, only betrayal." (158)

Perhaps, the "silence" in Jaya's life, imbibed and/or forced, speaks volumes of the patriarchal foundations of Indian society. In a way, the protagonist's "silence" appears inevitable, like, the silence before storm. The silent explosion inside Jaya helps her to regain her voice to tackle the giant socio-cultural structures of the Indian Establishment. Shashi Deshpande's discourse greater credibility as she makes plain how the towering and overpowering cultural structures incapacitate the women and the men without much discrimination in reality. The best example for this indiscriminate deflating of individuals by the Establishment, Mohan stands as a classic case. Notwithstanding his assumed and/or inherited male supremacy,

he remains as a victim without much fulfillment in his life. Possessed by the male ego boosted up the patriarchal inheritances, Mohan miserably fails to savor the pleasures of life—social or conjugal life in the real sense. Perhaps, these gender-transcending concerns of Shashi Deshpande place the author on a different plane. Thereby as a representative fictional character who transcends the limitations of feminism or any other 'ism' as such.

Thus Shashi Deshpande is found to be engaged in narrating simultaneously 'the immediate' and 'the for-ever' of the Indian society at large. Though the novel is replete with the concerns pertinent to the Question of Woman, the novelist, by creating postmodernist woman protagonists, like, Jaya in *That Long Silence* builds a pan-India narrative of the times and the timeless and also of the Woman and the Man. Perhaps, the feminist postmodernist woman protagonist transcends feminist concerns to reach out the Man of course not at the expense of her own self—her individuality, freedom, growth and pleasure in a nutshell her self-fulfillment. Though seemingly appearing to be bewildering and self-contradictory, the feminist postmodernist woman protagonist, Jaya and the ilk attempt to comprehend and retrieve life from the shackles of Cultural Imposition of Gender: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender... identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." (Butler: 25)

Accordingly, as has been indicated at the opening of this paper, Jaya thus fortified attempts to take control of her life with optimism imbued by "Introspection, Assertion and Calculated Reconciliation" with her husband, Mohan who hopefully must have been ready by now, having been chastened and chiseled by the grueling experiences of life. Though seemingly being a narrative of a Middleclass Indian Woman who is aware of the Indian adage that "silence is half-agreement" determinedly transforms herself to be a Woman of her Own Will to come out of the mire of "Silence" to safeguard herself and her husband and her family.

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