

The Construction, Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Marital Relationship in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, Indian English Fiction has entered a new phase of an incomparable portrayal of the New Indian woman who is not always happy with the constraining cultural, natural, and sexual duties allocated to her by patriarchal India's unconscious dawn. In her parental house, the woman may be a daughter or sister, and in her husband's family, she can be a wife and mother. She will also be required to perform a professional role. Above all, Nature gave her a sex-based position in which she is naturally limited. Divided between her natural and cultural roles, a woman can be only a daughter, sister, wife, or mother but never her real 'she'. She wants the freedom to think and live for herself as a human being and liberation from her womanhood. She sometimes escapes her culture-bound duties since there is no way out of her nature-bound responsibilities, particularly her function as a procreator and sexual partner.

Keywords: *Marriage, Matrix, Relationships, Culture-bound, Roles.*

In the present scenario, marriage, considered freedom from all patriarchic pinning, turns out to be another mode of subjugation, where women lose their identity when their whole being, including their body and soul, comes under the control of male chauvinism. Within the territories of marriage, husbands try to defile, dominate, and dehumanize them deliberately and make their lives meaningless. Deshpande's novels realistically present the decline and deterioration of the essential elements of marital love and spirituality in conjugal life, resulting in growing confusion and disgust, making sex a meaningless and monotonous metaphor. Even love marriage loses significance for them, and they lose their role as life support. The man-woman connection seems to be sustained only through sex. They share the family load evenly, but no one knows whether or not they love one another. Unconsciously doing their responsibilities deteriorates the sensation of holiness in husband-wife relations, which are destined together by the sanctified yarn of marriage for love and emotional captivity rather than

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living a dry and mechanical being that ends in common scorn and suspicion. This fear of living with a guy who does not love the woman as she anticipated him to be a pressing issue for new women in today's culture. The present study on Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* makes a modest effort to evaluate the meaninglessness of married life and the role women perform in creating, deconstructing, and reconstructing the man-woman relation.

The female protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are highly intelligent who confront their problems inwardly and analyze them objectively. They feel an emotional and mental chasm between themselves and their husbands, resulting in psychological trauma, isolation and dissatisfaction with themselves and life. Krishna Daiya, in her article “Shashi Deshpande’s *Roots and Shadows: A Critical Study*”, calls it the main theme of her fiction:

In her fiction, Deshpande mainly dwells on desperation and frustration, misunderstanding and incompatibility, sense of guilt and loss, loneliness and alienation of sensitive woman pitted against an ill-mated marriage and hostile circumstances around her. (*Indian Women Novelists in English*, 67)

They yearn and strive to seek fulfilment of their selves. However, in their quest for self-realization, they generally do not revolt against the traditional social customs but withdraw into themselves, thus deconstructing their marriages. In most cases, this withdrawal proves to be an effective means for reviving, rebinding and reconstructing their relationship through introspection and self-actualization, thus saving their marital life. This withdrawal is of two kinds- psychological or social. In the former, they probe deep into their psyche to weigh and consider their inner strength and potential; in the latter, they seek to ensure their position in the family and society.

Deshpande's work *That Long Silence* is mostly related to the silence of an Indian housewife. The novelist shows a contrasting marriage of Mohan and Jaya, who undergo mental torture and sufferings at the hands of her husband due to business malpractice. She wants to comprehend her own raw self, stripped of any frills since it alone might prove to be a wellspring of power in her arduous and lonely road towards selfhood. Deshpande's goal is to show the core reason for disintegration and to investigate what occurs in the minds of these contemporary women throughout the process of individualization. This is what she has to say about the book:

And I wrote *That Long Silence*, almost entirely a woman’s novel, nevertheless, a book about the silencing of one-half of humanity. A lifetime of introspection went into this novel, the one closest to me personally: the thinking and ideas in this are closest to my own. (Jasbir, *Creative Theory*, 210)

The Indian tradition of changing a woman's name after marriage is a step toward suppressing her individuality. It is, in fact, a beginning of searching for a new identity, thus allowing life to

slip away gently towards death without questioning its purpose. Trapped in an institution called marriage, they are left with no choice in their lives. The shadow of male dominance over every facet of their lives thwarts their progress. Jaya is of the current generation; thus, she refuses to exchange her name, Jaya, which represents triumph and resistance, for Suhasini, which stands for submission, and her husband gave her this name at the time of their marriage. Her refusal of name is important since it expresses her opposition to such conventions. But she has a continuous split awareness between being Jaya, i.e., 'herself,' and Suhasini, i.e., 'a decent wife.'

Jaya aspires to construct a dazzling fairytale home in the early days of her marriage by blocking off her anxieties, uncertainties, and doubts. She even surpasses her emotional requirements to build a strong bond relationship in her marital life. She is concerned that a candid declaration of her wants may disrupt the tranquilly of their relationship. The continuous suppression of emotions and self-respect gradually creates a strain in her psyche, which generates 'boredom' and 'the unending monotony' to make her 'family life un-durable.' She desires to be named as an ideal wife and therefore tries hard, but it cannot last long. She revolts in silence, when her husband discusses women being treated very cruelly by their husbands, as their 'strength' to tolerate everything silently: "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) Her individuality is pushed to the margins as she struggles to fulfil her obligations as a perfect wife and a loving and caring mother. To satisfy her husband, she changes her look to fit his perception of a contemporary lady. Despite representing the urban, middle-class lady exposed to liberal Western concepts, Jaya cannot break away from the shackles of male dogmatic notions. They live two lives: Mohan as a tyrant and Jaya as a mute follower. She wants to rebel, but Vanita Mami's comments that the spouse is like a "sheltering tree" (32) keep echoing in her mind. She cries despairingly:

'I can't cope, I can't manage, I can't go on' - had been neatly smothered. As also the question that had confronted me every day- 'Is this all?' The biggest question facing the woman of these diaries had obviously been: what shall I make for breakfast/lunch/tea/dinner? That had been the leit motif of my life. (70)

Jaya suppresses her thoughts of selfhood at first in her marriage, but she eventually understands that she should not stay quiet. In a column dubbed "Seeta," she begins writing light, amusing articles on the trials of a middle-class housewife. Mohan promotes her artistic abilities but with a dual mindset. Her topics are autobiographical in nature, which he finds annoying. She begins

to compromise with Mohan's requirements, but it starts drastically affecting her writing career and their relationship. In the process of self-examination and self-criticism, she starts realizing the futility of her life which is built around the needs of a husband only: "The truth was that we had both lost the props of our lives." (24). Despite her marriage and subsequent motherhood of two children, she is lonely. Shashi Deshpande used a wonderful picture of two bullocks to illustrate Indians' in general, and Jaya's in particular, mechanical and unemotional marital life:

A pair of bullocks yoked together...a clever phrase, but can it substitute for the reality? 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 image of a pair of bullocks thus yoked together means they share the load equally and efficiently but missing the essential of conjugal life, that is, the emotional bonding between them. Even the period of seventeen years could not bring that harmony of love and spiritual intimacy which is the soul of a marriage. Gradually, Jaya begins to realize that her very compromising attitude is shattering the growth of her individuality. She now needs a time of physical and mental isolation before she can confront her own life aspirations. She has every reason to be bitter when Mohan fails to be a "sheltering tree" to her. In her introspective mood, when Jaya tries to figure out the reason for marrying Mohan, she realizes that "the truth is that he had decided to marry me, I had only to acquiesce." (94). It was a love marriage where everything was present except love. After getting married, even the name Mohan lost its attraction to her and "it had tasted unfamiliar." In addition, even "the man too – we were married, yet he was a stranger." (94). They never expressed their inner upsurges to each other. Sex for them "had been as if the experience was erased each time after it had happened; it never existed in words." (95). She recalls the cold and emotionless memories of their relationship as husband and wife very touchingly:

Sensual memories are the coldest...As I thought those days, of my feelings, and then looked at the man lying beside me, nothing stirred in me. Those emotions and responses seemed to belong to two other people, not to the two of us lying here together. (95)

In R. K. Sharma's opinion, Mohan's unemotional and superficial way of lovemaking is the main factor behind their unsuccessful marital life:

The trouble is that for Mohan, sex seems to exist in isolation, a fact which Jaya resents. Slapdash and superficial in most ways, he fails to understand that a woman's sexuality is a complex phenomenon, made up of physical as well as emotional factors. (The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande, 112)

As far as love is concerned, Jaya, like other girls, believes to be tied in an emotional bonding before going to be involved into physical relation: “First there’s love, then there’s sex- that was how I had always imagined it to be. But after living with Mohan, she could realize that it could be the other way round too” (95). She confesses honestly:

Love...? Yes, what else could I call it but love when I thought of how I had longed for his physical presence, when I remembered how readily, almost greedily, I had responded to his touch? What else could I name it when I thought of the agony it had been to be without him, when his desires, his approval, his love, had seemed to be the most important thing in my life? (95)

As the first unsteady ecstasies subside, Jaya comprehends that it is not love, but desire as later she can see the variance between the two, and that too “becomes, in the final count, to a great extent extraneous.” (96). They, like actors, are provided with the roles of husband and wife on the stage of this world “to play them flawlessly, word-perfect.” (95). She believes love to be a myth, so opens up her bosom by expressing her fear and shame clearly in this way:

The strength of my feelings for him had both shamed and terrified me...Often, to get out of all that emotional extravagance, I had rationalize: we’re all frightened of the dark, frightened of being alone. And so we cling to one another, saying...I love you, I want you, I need you. Often I had told myself: love is a myth, without which sex with the same person for a lifetime would be unendurable. (97)

And, one night, after concluding the deed, she could sense her deepest loneliness and void of her spirit, which shattered her:

But, lying there, my body still warm and throbbing from the contact with his, it had come to me in one awful moment – that I was alone. The contact, the coming together, had been not only momentary, but wholly illusory as well. We had never come together, only our bodies had done that. (98)

Nothing may be more frustrating and disheartening in married life than the realization of the futility she had that day.

Jaya refuses to co-operate in her husband’s act of malpractice which breaks their relationship. Indira Bhatt describes it thus: “Shashi Deshpande unmarks both Jaya and Mohan when they face crisis in their lives. They have run into stormy weather and their secure shattered life washes away like a water in a rainy storm.” (Indian Women Novelists, 156) She now needs a time of physical and mental isolation before she can confront her own life aspirations. She decides to break her seventeen years long silence by deconstructing her marriage. Looking back on it, she finally gets the damning realization about the meaninglessness of their relationship: “We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us.” (185)

Being alienated from her family, Jaya starts writing spontaneously, which helps her delve deep into her fractured psyche. In this state of psychological progression, she endures a kind of

alteration through self-recognition. In the meantime, she also gets attention and support from Kamat, a widower. Though Jaya's relationship with Kamat is never precisely demarcated in the novel, it is an adventure to find some human affiliation and share her inner emotions. This relationship imparts an inner fulfilment to Jaya, which her marital life has failed to provide. In his friendly company, she removes all her self-consciousness and opens up. Kamat gives productive criticism to her writings. He motivates her to move towards the utilization of her capability to the fullest, which is the highest level known as self-actualization. In his friendly company, she can maintain her individuality without thinking of her identity as a man or a woman: "With this man I had not been a woman. I had been just myself- Jaya. There had been an ease in our relationship I had never known in any other"(153). With the passage of time, the initial spiritual nature of their relationship develops into a physical attraction, but Jaya controls herself and ruthlessly suppresses "an overwhelming urge to respond to him with my body," with "the equally overwhelming certainty of my mind that I could not do so." (157) After rejecting one such invitation from Kamat, he had been dead for her and she "had been detached from that woman who had seen him, remote from that experience." (157) However, the night before sharing the bed with Mohan, she had "a violent haemorrhage" (158) of tears... Having made love with Mohan, when Jaya is reminded of a quote about the man-woman relationship: "The relationship of man to woman is the most natural of one person to another." Reminding of Kamat's offer, she could not help herself in giving this abrupt remark: "Natural? There's only treachery, only deceit, only betrayal." (158)

Though it was only through Kamat that she would be able to discover answers to the many unanswered issues that had previously caused her guilt and pain. She battles alone with her mental trauma, which disrupts her mental balance, but she eventually triumphs. When she recovers from her mental turmoil, she grips with herself and her situation. Jaya, who was previously impetuous, matures. The seclusion teaches her that she is alone and responsible for her successes and mistakes. She understands the meaning of the dictum *Yathechchasi tatha kuru*: "Do as you desire." (192). Now, she does not feel sorry for putting aside her creative ability because this is her own decision. Deshpande uses an appropriate image of a larva swarming into a hole to describe the psychic state of Jaya. The most surprising thing is that she seems quite happy in dwindling into a stereotyped Indian wife than being a budding writer. She rejoices in being a wife and her children's mother, so she says: "Even a worm has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine – as Mohan's wife, as Rahul's and Rati's mother. And so I had crawled

back into my hole. I had felt safe there. Comfortable. Unassailable. And so I had stopped writing.” (148)

After this cathartic state, she is relieved of all the burden and pressure: “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 even rejects the persistent image of “two bullocks yoked together” saying: “Now I reject that image. It’s wrong. If I think of us in that way, I condemn myself to a lifetime of disbelief in ourselves.” (191) Though she is aware of her incompleteness yet has a complete approach towards life that one must be resilient in one’s system. Jaya sounds so philosophical and optimistic when she says:

We do not change overnight. It’s possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that life would be impossible. And if there is anything to know now it is this: life has always to be made possible. (159)

Thus, she reconstructs her marriage by reviving her family life after a period of isolation and mental turmoil.

Finally, the novel concludes with a revival of faith. Jaya's choice to break the quiet that had distracted and distorted her connection with her husband should be regarded as the beginning of a fresh beginning. The need for love and the modest pleasures of domesticity are incompatible with a woman's ambition to achieve as an individual. Her independence without love may drain her sensitivity in a never-ending battle with herself and society. Deshpande demonstrates via Jaya's story that a balanced and full existence is not only a utopian fantasy for a woman who desires to realize her creative potential and so attempts to liberate herself from mental terror and generations of bondage. Selfhood is attainable if a woman chooses to be herself, demonstrating the actual importance of her free, inherent, and unfettered personality.

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