



Research Paper

## That Long Silence: A Dialogue in the Silence

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**Abstract:** *That Long Silence* written by one of the most notable contemporary Indian women novelists, Shashi Deshpande, bagged Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990. The novel presents an account of the life of Jaya using first person narrative. It has been mostly read from feminist perspective; critics focused their attention on the themes of generational silencing of women and silence, used by the women characters, as a strategy for their survival. The present study intends to move this focus from silence to the dialogue that runs, at different levels, throughout the novel.

**Key words:** monologic, dialogic, conditionings, silence, dialogue, perspectives

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“A monologic work”, according to Bakhtin, “is one that is clearly dominated by a single, controlling voice or discourse.”(Murfin 177) A dialogic work, on the other hand, lets numerous voices emerge and engage in a kind of dialogue. *That Long Silence*, apparently, seems to be dominated by a haunting silence and has been widely discussed as such. As observed in one of the critical studies, “The novel highlights the patriarchal power structure in several man-woman relationships.”(Chandra 150) On a closer look, curious enough is to notice that the novel contains various voices in dialogue. The narrative rarely turns monologic from the beginning to the end. “Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces.”(Deshpande 1) The writer has tried to place all the mirrors and has thus dared to see all the faces; the ones that she herself liked to see along with those that others wanted to see of her.

Two different voices were heard in the very beginning; of the natural taste of the child Jaya and of the cultural taste of her father. He tries to make her love Pulaskar and Faiyar Khan, while the child wants to hear Rafi and Lata. On his failure in the attempt, he passes judgment; “What poor taste you have, Jaya.” (Deshpande 3) This sense of shame imbibed in the childhood stifled her voice in the later years and she was not able to tell Mohan that she never wanted to miss the ads in the movie, “What if he too said, ‘What poor taste you have, Jaya!’?”( Deshpande 3) Jaya feels fed up with the monotony in her life. She “had often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony.”( Deshpande 4) On the contrary, Mohan is all for system and self-assumed responsibility. His exclamation comes to us through Jaya, “How could those men have done such a thing!”, “Imagine putting your life in such a situation. It seems totally irresponsible to me.”( Deshpande 6) Jaya wishes to remind Mohan of his own words when she finds herself in the same miserable and uncertain situation because of her husband. But she checks herself and enters a dialogue with a part of herself representing Mohan. She finds that she is not the only one who has submitted herself to the cause of the family. Mohan has also submitted himself to the responsibility of the family. She sees the two of them as a “pair of bullocks yoked together.” (Deshpande 7) Jaya’s stream of consciousness seems to penetrate through Mohan’s to sustain the dialogue. In fact every character has his voice through Jaya. Rahul’s differences with his father, Rati’s feeling of insecurity because of her father’s attachment to her cousin, Revati—all find a voice in the narrative. Kids of every generation have to face reproach because of their changed habits, manners and preferences in the changing social scenes. Rahul and Rati are told by Ai, “My children were taught never to scorn any food...” (Deshpande 70) Going back in the generation, her own children, Jaya and her brother Dinkar had been told by Appa, ‘Your children are spoiled brats. When we were kids, we didn’t dare say anything. We had to eat what was on our plates without a word.’(Deshpande 71)

The voices of refusal are at all levels wherever one voice tries to dominate the others. We find the same in Jaya-Mohan relationship. It is not really that much a matter of male-female power equation. Rather it is all about family; in which a person, living a life where he is supposed to remain at the centre of responsibility,

gradually takes the authority to dictate, turns monologic and thinks it natural for others to listen to him and follow; while the other, instead of disrupting the whole altogether, gradually starts denying the dictates. Jaya parallels this resistance to “guerilla warfare”.

“We all do it; it is part of family life. Rahul refusing to have his bath before meals, Rati refusing to tell us who it was she was talking to on the phone, Appa crushing a raw onion and eating with relish while Saptagiri *ajji* watched disapprovingly.”(Deshpande 9)

Mohan and Jaya don’t seem to make conscious choices; rather the choices are made by their respective conditionings. Mohan is deeply rooted in his self-accumulated sense of duty towards the family. Jaya observes Mohan’s dear ideas of being a “dutiful son, dutiful father, husband, brother.”(Deshpande 9) Mohan’s idea of duty comes from his experience with his father. He wanted to be what his father could not be and what, he feels, has been the reason for the suffering of his family. He wanted to give his family the financial security that his own father was not able to provide his mother with. He wanted to accumulate all those things for his children that he himself could never have in his childhood. These had been the things that made his priority list in his childhood and his conviction in the years to come. It’s not Jaya that Mohan wants to control; it’s his image of a strong and responsible man in a family that he wants to create. It’s not Mohan that Jaya finds herself in conflict with; it’s her own socially conditioned self. She was brought up with the dictate, “a husband is like a sheltering tree.”(Deshpande 32) Her independent spirit questions the dictate and she is torn within. Mohan is also a product of the same social milieu. He was tortured for he could not find the protection of the ‘sheltering tree’ in his childhood. So he takes the work upon himself. He is not able to see that the shelter is blocking the path of sunshine for those growing under it, consequently they are languished. In the novel Rahul’s sense of independence is challenged by the authority of his father.

Kamat’s voice in the novel represents Jaya’s own questing self that checks her from involving in self-pity.

“I’m warning you- beware of this ‘women are like victims’ theory of yours. It’ll drag you down into a soft, squishy bog of self-pity. Take yourself seriously, woman. Don’t skulk behind a false name. And work— work if you want others to take you seriously.”(Deshpande 148)

He tells her that it is the fear of failure that stops her from working on serious issues. Husband, kids, family- all are used as excuses to avoid the provoking self.

“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. It hadn’t been Mohan’s fault at all. And it had been just a coincidence, though it had helped, that just then Mohan had propelled me into that other kind of writing. ‘I encouraged you,’ he had said to me. He was right. But, I went on with my chest-beating fit of penitence; Mohan had not forced me to do that kind of writing. I’d gone into it myself. With my eyes wide open.”(Deshpande 148)

Indifference to the suffering of the other is garbed in the fine clothing of ‘love and care for family.’ Jaya is dissuaded from having Kusum at home. She was asked to “Think of the children...” Be it male or female, the indifference remains the same, “Mohan, Ai, Dada, Ravi. Such different persons, my husband, my mother, my two brothers...it had amused me to see how alike they were in their objections.” In *Musee Des beaux Arts*, Auden talks of this indifference of humanity to the individual tragedy,

“...how everything turns away

Quite leisurely from the disaster”

The stories like the one of the sparrow and the crow referred to in the novel, make a part of Jaya’s consciousness. The foolish credulous crow is made to stand out in the rain, begging the sparrow to be let in, “while the Sister sparrow spins out her excuses.” Jaya and Mohan have different levels of sensibility; while Mohan noticed “neither Nayana’s swollen middle, nor her slim ankles that look so incongruously girlish under the fecund swelling,” Jaya notices “all that and more...that the silver anklets which had clinked so gaily while Nayana walked were gone.” (Deshpande 8) Mohan perceives strength in his mother’s silent resignation while Jaya sees despair, “a despair so great that it would not voice itself.” ((Deshpande 36) Jaya and Mohan both work according to their own concepts of family life; none is to be blamed. “Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have even snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel.”(Deshpande 7) Jaya accepts that it was not her alone who has snipped off bit of herself. Mohan himself seems to be the sparrow that blinds herself to the world outside and bothers only about herself and her family. Family, for Mohan, is a responsibility; its sustenance and adding every possible luxury to the basic amenities, his only duty; at least he claims so. For his fraud, he justifies himself by asserting that it was all for the family, to provide every possible comfort to the same. Jaya has an objection to this assertion of Mohan: “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 9) Actually it sounds the same as her own assertion that she didn’t switch onto serious writing because of her family. It’s not that the narrator is involved in self-pity, rather she questions, “But have I

ever been a trodden worm?”(Deshpande 6) The dialogue sustains. Mohan alone is not held responsible. The narrative attempts to remain neutral and to a remarkable extent succeeds in doing so.

“I can see those two now, as one sees other people, their existence confined to that one moment, the man climbing gingerly, almost on tiptoe, the woman walking with the steadiness of familiarity, the dirt and ugliness obviously for her a normal part of the surrounding.”(Deshpande 7)

The voices though given voice, through the woman narrator, are not dominated by the latter's. Jaya was brought up in a family where the father subsided to the will of the lady of the house. Strangely enough, every woman in the house enjoyed the power to execute her will in one way or the other. It was a kind of paradox that Jaya was given the name 'Jaya' to give the feel of her victorious destiny, but even the meanest of her tastes were criticized. Mohan was brought up in a family where the father evaded responsibility and the mother adopted the path of silent resignation. The writer understands the cause and effect relationship and so gives the other characters full opportunity to justify their responses to the present situations. Every action is bound by sufficient reasons. Jaya suffers for she is torn, the way she was admired by her father and the way Mohan treats her are poles apart. Appa encouraged her expression of anger, “Come on, come on, I'm sure you can do better, you can't stop at that!” (Deshpande 82) Mohan made her realize that anger makes a woman 'unwomanly.' He does not expect his wife to show anger, “How could you? I never thought my wife could say such things to me. You're my wife...” (Deshpande 82) Again this thing has sufficient reasons as Mohan once told Jaya, 'my mother never raised her voice against my father, however badly he behaved to her.' Jaya's father has always told her that she is unique and special, while Mohan sets certain standards before her to imitate. He wants her to have an aura of modern woman that he was impressed with in his teenage combined with the silent strength of his mother. Not only Jaya, ghosts of the past keep tormenting Mohan also:

“I was wrong when I thought he saw no ghosts. They were there for him too, and it was as if he was trying to exorcise them by talking. For, if he referred to his present situation once, he went back to his past much more often.(He rarely spoke of the future, only very occasionally mentioning a time when we would be, he said, 'as we were'.”(Deshpande 32)

Mohan has faced a non-existent status in his childhood because of poverty. His fees were submitted through charity of a rich old man. He wanted to be one among the elite class people. The ladies that he watched with admiration at Crossword House created a lasting impression on him. Their 'English' added to their exotic aura. The feeling of being different from them was terrible for him. In all the years to come, Mohan seems trying frantically to fill the gap. Even his choice of Jaya in marriage was guided by the same. He had a clear notion of his wish of a happy and cultured wife. Jaya knew that she is not that so-called cultured stuff and asked her brother to withdraw the proposal. Mohan has always wanted recognition and is pleased with his wife's reputation as a 'writer' of "Seeta" as it added to his social value.

“Those women had given him his first vision of a different kind of life, a life that had none of the poverty, the shabbiness and ugliness, the rigid rules and rituals he had known till then. They gave him a glimpse of another world, a world he knew then he longed to be in, to be a part of.”(Deshpande 90)

Jaya feels herself chained to his dream though Mohan does not have any conscious intention to hurt his wife. Rather he makes sure that he has not done anything to do so. After every intercourse he asks her, “Did I hurt you?” (Deshpande 95) Jaya always responded in “No”. Actually in their respective socio-cultural surroundings, both of them have “rehearsed the roles of husband and wife so well.”(Deshpande 95) So, when it was time to perform the role in reality, there seemed no space for change as any deviation would lead to disorder or chaos. They were perfectly in the habit of being husband and wife and now, as the narrator herself admits, “a habit is something that is infinitely more difficult to get rid of.”(Deshpande 98)

Towards the end of the novel, the image of the 'bullocks yoked together' is discarded and the narrator questions, “Why do I presume the understanding is mine alone?” (Deshpande 193) She watches Vasant and Rahul as just two persons who are at ease with each other being out of the slots that the social ties bind them with. The free play in their bonding, perceived now by her, makes her realize the phenomenon, “I feel unusually light myself as if Rahul's buoyancy has communicated itself to me. Or is my feeling of lightness connected somehow to that odd view of Rahul and Vasant I had? As if in releasing them from the slots I'd put them in I've released myself somehow.”(Deshpande 190) She realizes that the final words of Lord Krishna to Arjuna, '*Yathechhasi tatha kuru*' means “Do as you desire”, are meant to confer humanness on Arjuna. Now she is able to visualize this humanness of every character including herself, and confers the same on all. “With whom shall I be angry?” We are provided with the knowledge and then left with the choice. It's a matter of perspective. “Life has always to be made possible”(Deshpande 193), this is the knowledge that Jaya gains and is left with the choice of “how”. One possibility suggested here is to shift the perspective, to come out of the rehearsed roles, to start the dialogue out of the psyche.

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