

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Irreversible Silence in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

Silence feels like a security blanket but is perilously deceptive. Many marriages continue for years in a state of armed truce. In *That Long Silence* as a partner, though unconsciously, Mohan belittles Jaya or tries to control her like many Indian husbands resulting into a state of self-loathing, helplessness, and desperation and finally, she experiences only an abusive relationship. This paper puts forth a kind of irreversible conditions due to some conflict in the selected literary work only to discuss at observing decisions through lens of reversible and irreversible, the power of decision-making process becomes dynamic that changes the spectrum of life events.

Keywords: That Long Silence, Indian literature, domestic violence, decision making, irreversible.

Introduction

“Your silence will not protect you.”¹

Marriage is preferred as a cure-all for isolation whereas marital isolation saps strong marital relationships, even though couples manage outwardly to appear to be intact. Unfortunately, this state has been experienced by many men and women in a cultural country like India too who prefer maintaining silence in marital life to breaking the marriage. Consequently, marital silence, a potent killer, has destructive influence on physical and mental health resulting in the development of depression, paranoia, schizophrenia, rape, suicide, and mass murder. Besides time pressures, work demands, or economic anxieties, the conventional mindsets of men who look upon marriage as a social ritual are the sole cause for many of the remaining couples ‘together but unhappy’ about staying in marriage bond. Like a terminal virus, isolation invades marriage silently, slowly, and painlessly at first. The dictionary will tell that isolation is the condition of being alone separated, solitary, set apart. When isolation infects a marriage, a husband and a wife exclude each other and experience a feeling of distance, a lack of closeness, and a little real intimacy. Any living soul is not created to live solo. Human being especially yearns for intimacy, and hence marries but only a few couples achieve marital bliss. Those who do not achieve this, share a bed, eat at the same dinner table, watch the same TV, share the same checking account, and parent the same children—and still be alone. Then the couple may live together, but don't share life. The unmet needs of couples indicate the presence of isolation in a marriage; the irony is that slipping into a state of isolation seems to offer protection and self-preservation. Silence feels like a security-blanket but is perilously deceptive. Many marriages continue for years in a state of armed truce. Competition replaces cooperation, and ugly reality dashes the dreams of hope as conflict unravels the fabric of love and concern. Broken hearts stain pillows with bitter tears. The choice has to be made to beat the isolation

¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Amazon Publications, 1984, p. 41.

when once it has been realized. One has to realize that one don't have to be married a long time to be isolated. When the scope to entertain the healthy, transparent communication is almost null, silence may be the resort. Silence, if positive, has energy to get people to think and to act, and it is a powerful ally life coaching. This silence, the suppressed anger of any Indian wife/husband and the desired state by any Indian wife/husband rule their long years of married life very shockingly.

The novel *That Long Silence* (1988) paints the silent but futile struggle of the woman–protagonist, Jaya alias Suhasini, that carries away her to no focus point and hence a question arises at her altered personality within her. The only surprising factor is she waited for long years taking a baby boomer resolution. However, she does not hold a grudge but ready to forgive. As resentment and oneness cannot coexist and she knows that it needs to be resolved, she expects her husband to allow her into his life with a room of her own. Jaya's life shatters when her husband is asked to leave his job while allegations of business malpractice against him are investigated. Her household existence disrupted, her husband's repute in question and their future as a family in jeopardy, Jaya, a failed writer, is haunted by memories of the past. Discrepancies and frustrations in their seventeen-year-old marriage, discontent in her two teenage children, and the claustrophobia of her childhood instigate to surface. In her tiny suburban Mumbai flat, Jaya captures with other truths about herself—among them her failure at writing and her fear of anger. Shashi Deshpande gives us an exceptionally accomplished portrayal of a woman trying to erase a 'long silence' begun in childhood and rooted in her and in the constraints of her life.

Mohan, her husband, thinks the silence of her mother is her strength. But Jaya feels the silence is the result of despair: “I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter than silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender” (36). The couple represents the simulated ideal status of the Indian marriage. Jaya feels fed up with the monotony

and fixed pattern of her life: Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, and unending monotony (4). “But I said nothing. It was so much simpler to say nothing. So much less complicated” (99). In her attempt to rediscover her ‘true self’, she finds herself as an unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer. Society does not expect any woman to settle her issues on her own. Even when a woman has been shooting up the career ladder and earning more than her man, when it comes to family life and the role in it, man still holds the trump card. The sayings in every day of a girl/woman go as these: “Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws home. Wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married, I have done nothing but wait. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for the children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home ... (30). She becomes fed up with this kind of waiting for something or somebody and expects some disaster which could bring a change in the routine life. Love, warmth, acceptance, and the freedom of true intimacy and genuine oneness as couple and the quiet desperation of living together but never really touching each other deeply do not shock the reader as it has been observed around him.

Silence to spousal abuse

Does Shashi Deshpande paint exactly what she has seen outside? She may want to say something more to what has been painted in the novel. Married life is not meant to be alone in the most intimate human relationship Society/God created. Jaya has chosen to move away from the chill of isolation and make life meaningful. Many learned to bury feelings from their mothers and grandmothers, whose silences protected marriages that were their livelihoods. They couldn't risk behavior that might get them booted out of the house. But hiding anger may be far more costly than losing a relationship: who deal with anger indirectly or attempt to suppress it are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and physical complaints than

women who are more direct. Such suppression may even be deadly. "Being quiet may or may not protect your marriage," says Elaine D Eaker, a popular modern psychologist, "*but you sure aren't doing your health any good by being silent.*"² The attempt of silencing Jaya by her husband maps out Domestic abuse or Spousal abuse that occurs when wife/husband of the couple tries to dominate and control the other person. According to Central Government Act, Section 3 in The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, "*...harms or injures or endangers the health, safety, life, limb or well-being, whether mental or physical, of the aggrieved person or tends to do so and includes causing physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal and emotional abuse and economic abuse.*"³ Domestic violence and abuse which are used to gain and maintain total control over the other serves only one purpose as the abuser doesn't 'play fair.' Abusing is an instrument forcing the other to experience fear, guilt, shame, and intimidation to wear down and keep under his or her thumb. There may also be threat to hurt. Emotionally abusive relationships can destroy self-worth, lead to anxiety and depression, and makes the affected person feel helpless and alone. The first step to breaking free is recognizing the abusive situation. Once the reality of the abusive situation has been acknowledged, it is always welcome to try for coming out of such a situation. Out of many signs of abusive relationship, the most forceful sign is silence of the one against the other out of fear. Jaya feels like walking on eggshells around Mohan and constantly watching what she would say and do in order to avoid a blow-up only to end up their marital relationship unhealthy and abusive. "But the words remained unsaid. I know his mood was best met with silence" (78). She is torn between love and hate, liking and disliking for her own husband and life situations. As the title of the novel indicates, Jaya for very long in her past life tried to play the role of traditional woman, the embodiment of tolerance, suffering and courage. As a partner, though

² FOLTZ-GRAY, DOROTHY. *Go Ahead...Get Mad!*. NOV 3, 2011.

<https://www.prevention.com/life/a20469181/the-healthiest-ways-to-express-anger/>

³ <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/406908/>

unconsciously, he belittles her or tries to control her like many Indian husbands resulting into a state of self-loathing, helplessness, and desperation and finally, she experiences only an abusive relationship. Jaya's voice "I had learnt it at last no questions, no retorts, only silence" (143) paints the domineering, devastating existence of any housewife in India. However, Jaya's voice is not a complaint but an analysis enabling her to make a psychic voyage from ignorance to knowledge, through suffering challenging 'dumb submission'; 'unconditional devotion'; and 'a lifelong slavery' that would lead to identity loss subjecting her to mental, emotional and physical compromises⁴. The silence and the silencing of the woman as a gendered subject in India is the spotlight of the novel pinpointing the deafness of the patriarchal social order towards women. In a way, the 'long silence' which is the result of patriarchy's refusal to comprehend women's 'language' in so far as women's work, speech, acts and aspirations are concerned becomes the central character in the novel. Non-verbal element of silence represents the Indian wife's pathetic but socially accepted role. As Mahatma Gandhi says: "*Speak only if it improves upon the silence.*"⁵ The protagonist, Jaya has made silence as a blanket masking all her emotions which protected her from physical abuse. But there has been psychological abuse, a feeling of hurt sprouted and grown along with her marital life span. A point of time has come where it devours her in such a way that she has felt like taking a sudden turn against her own situation and respond as a woman and to exist. The burden of breaking the silence is finally placed, thus, on the woman - protagonist in the novel and it seems to imply that silence can be broken only if women 'learn' men's language. What has been one of the strategies that can be implemented in any such situation? It is to put pen to paper and engrave your anger that facilitates you admit and begin to comprehend it: James W. Pennebaker, a professor of psychology from university of Texas recommends to "...ask

⁴ Apter, Teri. *Professional Progress: Why Women Still Don't Have Ways*. London, Macmillan Press Ltd, 1993.

⁵ <https://www.civilisconsulting.com/speak-only-if-it-improves-upon-the-silence-reducing-social-media-noise/>

yourself in writing what makes you angry in a certain situation or toward a certain person. That process helps undermine the anger both psychologically and physiologically."⁶ All traumas that were experienced by her throughout the marital life were still unobjectionable to Mohan who had asked her to paint the simulated ideal woman and not to expose the true colours of a wife on the canvas. Not able to bear his allegation that she had failed in her duty to support him at the time of crisis, she laughed without control. Insulted and irritated Mohan left the house that led her to engage in self- introspection. She wanted to shout at Mohan, "I didn't mean to laugh, I wasn't laughing at you, I was laughing at everything – marriage, us, this whole absurd exercise, we call life" (155). She said: "...no woman can be angry. Have you ever heard of an angry young woman? ... A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated" (147) Jaya who had shaped her life according to the desire of Mohan and loses her own self and identity. She admits: 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 out of penitence, Mohan had not forced me to do that kind of writing. I'd gone into it myself with my eyes wide open (148). Patriarchal values have led the overwhelming majority of us to believe that a woman's place is in the home. And yet men try to enact a dynamic role such that the role of wife gets shadowed down completely on the 'All the world's a stage' syndrome (William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*) resulting into a kind of negative marital energy. But shockingly, the negative energy in the relationship never does boomerang from wife to husband resulting in an unhappy relationship in her mental plain only. Outwardly, everyone – her husband, children, in-laws and kith and kin look at her as a 'Lady of Cool.' Once Jaya realises and exhibits it realizing her self-worth and decides to give up the pre-fixed norms of the society. Rashmi Gaur observes: "The haunting riddle of the ultimate purpose of a

⁶ <https://www.prevention.com/life/a20469181/the-healthiest-ways-to-express-anger/>

woman's life within the family can be solved when she learns to assess her worth as an individual and shuns to be guided by pre-fixed norms about it."⁷ Though the idea of 'a pair of bullocks yoked together' fades away one question haunts her: "With whom shall I be angry" (52). Mohan listens and incorporates the traditional definition of Hindu marriage into their marital status and plays the domineering role following the sutra:

Karyeshu Mantri, Karaneshu Daasi,
Rupeeha Lakshmi, Kshamayaa Dharitrii,
Bhojyeshu Mata, Shayanetu Rambha,
Shat Karma Yukta, Kula Dharma Patni.⁸

Mohan tells her casually all the time. "My mother never raised her voice against my father, however badly he behaved to her" (83). When Jaya tries to break the silence by putting down on paper that whole she had suppressed in her seventeen years silence and asserts herself. "I will have to speak, to listen; I will have to erase the silence between us" (83). She breaks the silence, writes her story and concludes. *That Long Silence* which had reduced her to fragments is broken at last. She realizes that fragmentation of "SELF" is not possible. "I am not afraid.....any more. The panic has gone" (191).

Is it an irreversible act or an reversible one?

In any literary work, there is a kind of irreversible condition due to some conflict prevail. If a particular process takes the system from an initial state 'A' through a continuous sequence of intermediate states to a final state 'B' then, the reverse of this process is a change over time from state 'B' to state 'A' with the same intermediate states occurring in the reverse time sequence. To visualize the reverse of any process, imagine making a movie film of the events

⁷ Gaur, Rashmi. "Images of Indian Woman in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*—Stereotypes, Myths and Realities." *Writing the Female: Akademi Awarded Novels in English*, edited by Methillesh K.Pandey, New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004, p 179.

⁸ <https://www.speakingtree.in/blog/noble-virtues-of-a-women>

of the process. Each frame of the film is a snapshot picture of the state at one instant. If you run the film backwards through a movie projector, you see the reverse process. An irreversible process is a spontaneous process whose reverse is neither spontaneous nor reversible. That is, the reverse of an irreversible process can never actually occur and is impossible.

However, life is neither science nor experimental. So pushing your mind, while making decisions from 'A' to 'B', is a dynamic process. Two types of irreversible processes: 1) external irreversibility; 2) Internal irreversibility play a major role to push from 'A' state to 'B' state. To push from one state to other, decision-making is necessary. Whenever a decision has to be made, an element of uncertainty prevails, that makes one's decisions slow or fast. Decisions are like doors: one-way (irreversible)/two-way (reversible), as stated by Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon.com.⁹ Irreversible decisions are type-1 decisions to be made methodically, carefully, slowly as you have to live with the consequences for long. Once you are knock at observing decisions through lens of reversible and irreversible, the power of decision-making process becomes dynamic that changes the spectrum of life events.

When you observe Jaya very closely, she and her members of family encountered devastating and traumatic events. Though the events affected and left permanent imprints on human mind, which turned it into a kind of trauma of tragic experiences, emotions and feelings. Trauma leads to a violent behaviour and people with different personalities react contrarily to parallel experiences her life was changed after her son's and Mohan's deport and really haunting her; After her husband's loss of job, and staying away from her children affected so much that pain was recurred itself frequently whenever she encountered a horrible situation; after the disappearance of her son and husband, she lived a tumultuous life, full of grief and sorrows. She tried to live a new life free from troubles. Her marital life is fragments, always

⁹ <https://www.inc.com/jeff-haden/amazon-founder-jeff-bezos-this-is-how-successful-people-make-such-smart-decisions.html>

missing something. She prefers silence which packs their marital relationship. “We don’t 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” (193). When Mohan, her spouse, leaves home that makes her uneasy and she begins to ruminate. She views her social protection at stake. She is haunted by a kind of incompleteness without Mohan: “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 only two persons. A man, woman” (8). In spite of all these happenings, Jaya decides to pull herself and see that her marital life is broken. She realizes that no one imposed silence on her and she can reverse the family bond tied tightly. She recollects all the irreversible acts done in her life where she has neither delayed to act nor stopped to act, and decides to follow a two-way approach from then onwards after her husband’s return and their reunion. She may be in line with: “The better we understand abusers, the more we can create homes and relationships that are havens of love and safety, as they should be. Peace really does begin at home.”¹⁰

Conclusion

Christopher Morley’s “A man who has never made a woman angry is a failure in life”¹¹ is perfect but the question arises how she is allowed to express her anger. Her anger has to be voiced reaching to the ears for who it is intended; her anger has never to be silenced. The individuality of a man or a woman shall not be placed at the altar of a marriage. Throughout the history of the Hindu married life, women’s voices have been forced to be silent and

¹⁰ Bancroft, Lundy. *Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*, Amazon. Co, UK, 2003, pp. 83 - 84, https://ia600108.us.archive.org/30/items/LundyWhyDoesHeDoThat/Lundy_Why-does-he-do-that.pdf

¹¹ <https://internetpoem.com/christopher-morley/quotes/a-man-who-has-never-made-a-woman-angry-is-a-807/>

minimized by the dominant voice of society. Shashi Deshpande tries to create voices in women's culture with 'writing' as an establishing voice & as an art accomplished in the novel.

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