

Evolution of Optimism in Individuals in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande, a humanitarian Indian novelist, focuses on the optimistic values in many of her plays. *That Long Silence* is one such play that analyses the problems of her characters Jaya, Mohan, and Jeeja, and improvises them in all walks of life. She makes the readers clasp the thought that an individual with morality will always make a good living and will also find delight in life. Shashi Deshpande's characters help the readers in acquiring, developing and utilising their positive skills which eventually help them in leading a flourishing and respectable life.

This paper examines and explores the optimistic values in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and also suggests considering her belief that optimism will bring happiness and peace to an individual, a family and to the society at large.

Key words: compassion, respect, resilience, reconciliation, hope, justice

Shashi Deshpande, a humanitarian Indian novelist, is expressive and persuasive in making her readers travel from despair to hope and from darkness to light and helps them in understanding the value of life. She imparts to the readers the importance in the creation of a positive environment through her novels. For Shashi Deshpande, the ability to think positive is the key for every human being to survive with happiness as the murky mind set of humans is mostly filled with revenge, anger, domination, contempt, dislike and disrespect for one another which ruin the happiness of life. Shashi Deshpande advocates: "No country, however economically developed can call itself a civilised country if its artists, writers, scholars and thinkers are treated with contempt" ("Keynote Address"). The problems that people create for themselves and for the society urges Shashi Deshpande to bring awareness on being positive

minded. The love, respect, compassion, resilience, reconciliation, hope, justice, discipline and knowledge in human beings are the most important themes of Shashi Deshpande's novels.

That Long Silence revolves around the bitter experiences of marital relationship of the protagonist Jaya and her husband Mohan. In the initial stage of their lives, they undergo recurrent hindrances in their relationship, but later, they realise their mistakes and the turmoil of their separation makes them reconcile and restore their lives in tranquility. Perhaps, the novel conveys the key message that life partners have to be candid and accept the views of one another in order to experience a peaceful and happy life. Certainly, the novel also highlights the importance of communication between the spouses.

Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence*, is very delicate and remains in silence at all the critical circumstances in life right from her childhood. For instance, when her father says that he likes classical music and he wants Jaya also to love Pulsakar and Faiyaz, she readily accepts though she loves the music of Rafi and Lata, the popular singers of the Hindi film industry (TLS3). Everytime she fails to express her opinion, the delicacy continues even after her wedding. Her husband Mohan dislikes watching advertisements but Jaya loves to watch commercials and she associates the advertisements to the happy families that she visualises in the society. Her husband criticises about the poor taste that she has for music and keeps insulting her for what she is, but she manages to retain the respect that she has for him despite his dominance, but the mutilation remains in her forever. She tolerates the humiliation and discouragement, but never wants to communicate her thoughts and the author envisages Jaya as: "She is not clear of what she wants, but Mohan is very clear of life that he wants to lead. She opines that she cannot blame Mohan, for even if he had asked me _what do you want?- I would have found it hard to give him a reply" (TLS 25). Though Jaya accepts that it is her mistake to fail at communicating her thoughts, she is unable to find the reason for the serenity.

Audre Lorde, who is a leading African-American essayist, insists people to communicate and to acquire the courage to put forward their views in public. She states in her speech at New Symra Beach Foria that:

I write for those women who
do not speak, for those who
do not have a voice because
they were so terrified,
because we are taught to
respect fear more than
ourselves. We've been taught
that silence would save us, but it is not. (83)

Effective communication holds the preliminary grip in leading a preferred life and also helps human beings in solving unbearable difficulties and unexpected disruptions smoothly and efficiently.

Jaya gets married at the age of seventeen but she feels that she has gained the experience of a wife of several years in the very beginning of her marital life. It is her submissive character that destines her life to separation and stress. Mohan, Jaya's husband is tactful in dominating his wife. Very frequently, he asserts: "One who finds the coin first rules the other at home" (TLS 6). Jaya feels bad, however, she firmly believes that speaking against her husband is dishonest and discourteous, and so she remains unobtrusive. She says: "Women can never be angry. She can only be neurotic hysterical, frustrated" (TLS 147). Jaya accepts the tenets of her ancestors thoughtlessly that women are created for men. Shashi Deshpande recommends spouses to acknowledge that there is no inequality between them and they ought to respect each other to live a better life.

Ever since Jaya is married to Mohan, she lives in the shade of her husband and considers him to be a sheltering tree and she believes that her topmost commitment as a wife is to gratify the desires of her husband in all circumstances of life.

But as years roll by, the tragedies that Jaya faces in life make her realise that all this while she had been dishonest to herself and recognises that she has lost her individuality to her husband and fails to disclose her own-self. Shashi Deshpande opines that human beings ought to have respect for one another and learn not to be proud by making the other counterpart feel inferior as it will ruin the happiness of both.

Jaya and Mohan move to a place called Dadar flat which is filled with filth and stench. Jaya gets adjusted even to the obnoxious smell, the stench of dead cockroaches, toilets and drains, but not with her loneliness. As George Eliot mentions in her novel *Middlemarch*: “Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve, who kept their honeymoon in Eden, but had their first little one among the thorns and thistles of the wilderness” (*Middlemarch*683). Jaya feels isolated and worried, Mohan senses that she is not comfortable and probes her, but she cheats her own conscience saying she is happy. She assumes that the needs of a husband and wife are inseparable as she expresses: “My needs, our needs, the children’s needs –it was impossible to untangle them, I couldn’t even try, and it was too late anyway” (*TLS*118). She suffers in isolation and gloom over not being able to speak and assumes that she has no life beyond the needs of her husband and children. But later, Jaya comprehends that she has already spoiled the beautiful and valuable moments of her life, yet she waits for her husband to visit her. She yearns for the right time and fails to create an opportunity for herself like the story, *When I Become a Big Boy in You Can Win* by Shiv Kera. The habit of waiting starts in people from a very early age like the small boy in the story.

When the boy is small, he wishes to become a big boy. When he goes to school, he looks at the college boys and thinks that only when he goes to college, he will be happy. And after he finishes his college, he thinks he will be happy after he gets a good job with a good package. After he gets a job, he thinks that if he gets married, he will be happy and after he gets married, he longs for a kid and feels that only after getting a kid, he will be happy, and after he gets a kid, he thinks he will be happy only if his son or daughter gets settled in life and finally he ends up in seeing nothing in his life. (Kera 21)

Thus, the boy’s precious life vanished without peace and happiness. Similarly, Jaya wastes her life without sharing her opinion with her husband. Shashi Deshpande creates awareness among the readers that human beings must not wait for opportunities to knock their doors but they must create opportunities and learn to live in the present. Shashi Deshpande expresses through her character Jaya:

The waiting game starts early in childhood. Wait until you get married, wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws’ home, Wait for the children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch carrier man...(*TLS* 30)

Jaya also acknowledges that they have been silently weaving the threads of guilt, anger and resentment between them all these days and accepts that the fabric is complete, but both of them are not aware of the overall design because of their long silence.

The most important commodity that stops one from being optimistic is fear. Jaya gives up her profession as a writer because of her fear. She assumes that her husband is not interested in her writing and she is also scared of failure. To gratify her husband, she has enforced herself to curtail her own writing skills. She opines: “Looking at his stricken face I had been convinced, I had done him wrong” (*TLS* 144). But a deep analysis proves that she is scared of failing and her misinterpretation about her

husband prevents her from writing. She advocates: “Middle class bourgeoisie, upper caste. Distanced from real life. Scared of writing scared of failing. Oh, God, I had thought. I can’t take it anymore. Even a worm has hole it can crawl into. I had mine as Mohan’s wife as Rahul’s and Rati’s mother” (TLS148). Jaya envisions herself as the best wife and mother but fails to portray herself as a writer and sets the boundary for her skills. Shashi Deshpande emphasises that people must trust that catastrophes in life will give proactive experiences and will create a pathway for success. So, they must feel confident in all their endeavours.

Morality and integrity play an important role in each one’s life. Jaya finds her relationship with her friend Kamat, soothing and feels that he is better in all walks of life than her husband and maintains friendship with him clandestinely. However, she is unable to help when she sees him falling on the floor and dies bleeding. She is scared that if she helps him, her sneaky and furtive relationship would be publicised. One of the researchers by name Sarala Palkar rightly observes: “She perhaps does the role of wife to perfection but fails as a human being” (Palkar 166). Jaya carries guilt throughout her life for her inaction at the time of necessity. It is necessary for any husband and wife to reduce the space between each other and should learn to be honest with one another.

However, later, Jaya understands the importance of communication and senses that she has led a desolate life without communicating with her husband and children. She also gains confidence and decides to write under the pseudonym ‘Seeta’ and it is evident through her words that she has become fearless and has realised her own worth. She says “Well, I’ve achieved this. I’m not afraid any more. The panic has gone” (34). The recollection of hardships she has undergone and her happy memoirs of her future help her in analysing her mistakes and in motivating her to communicate with people around her.

It is Jaya who sets the boundary and curbs the liberty herself. As Swami Vivekananda expresses: “Liberty of thought and action is only condition of life of growth and well-being” (Representative Selections from Indian Prose 14). Swami Vivekananda writes a reply to Kidi, his friend, saying: “His idea is to bring to the door of the meanest, the poorest, the noble ideas that the human reaches developed both in and out of India and he wants people to think for themselves” (Selections from Indian Prose 14). Jaya acknowledges that if she has explained her whole concern to her husband in the initial days of their married life, the whole thing would have got stabilised and a word from her would have made everything clear for a conjugal relationship. She feels bad that she did not help Kamat, however, she takes a decision to lead a happy life and learns to live for herself.

Shashi Deshpande brings the evolution of positive qualities in Jaya and these positive changes in Jaya help people to be optimistic. Shashi Deshpande makes the readers strong in facing their failures which will nurture their skills in future and she also teaches the importance of self-awareness through Jaya. Jaya states: “I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us” (TLS192). Shashi Deshpande motivates the readers to erase their long silence to make them courageous to face their challenges in life. Jaya makes the readers move from failure to success, submission to proactiveness, and isolation to reconciliation.

Mohan, Jaya’s husband, is very tactful in dominating Jaya in all aspects of life. He rechristens Jaya as Suhashini as he believes that the name Suhashini is associated with patience and he reiterates frequently that everything he does is for his wife and children and not for him. He wishes to rule the house like his father and he expects his wife to be submissive like his mother. His mother never speaks against the rules laid by her husband, though her husband has been so rude to her all the time. But at the end Mohan is able to realise that he learned from his father to ill-treat his wife and tries hard to change his attitude.

Mohan is a successful person only because of his hard work. He has suffered in his childhood. Rabindranath Tagore says in *Reminiscences*: “Luxury was a thing almost unknown in the days of my infancy. The standard of living was, then, as a whole, much simpler than it is now” (255). Mohan walks in the rain as his parents fail to afford an umbrella for him and he always dresses with the mud-spattered clothes as he does not have any extra clothes, and is unable to pay even his school fee. He has been humiliated for wearing the ill-fitting cast-off clothes, but later he senses that it is humiliation, discouragement and disgrace that have helped him in discovering the skills that are hidden in him. Mohan’s situation reminds the reader of J.K. Rowling’s opinion on poverty: “Poverty entails fear and stress and sometimes depression. It means a thousand petty humiliations and hardships, climbing out of poverty by your own efforts that are something on which to pride yourself, but poverty itself is romanticised only by fools” (Harvard Magazine, June 2008). Yet, Mohan’s attitude towards poverty makes him successful in life.

Mohan, who has no concern for his family, makes an escape without trepidation to Delhi to save himself as he is accused of accepting bribe from his office and he deserts his family thoughtlessly. He behaves mercilessly and it is obvious when Jaya tells him: “Yes, I know what you think of your mother, Dinkar and you are laughing at her, making fun of her, your own mother. How can I expect you to have any feelings for me?” (TLS118). The suffering that Mohan undergoes in isolation helps him in realising the value of his wife and comprehends his miseries and reinstates his job and decides to reunite with his wife. So he telegrams Jaya about his visit. Mohan can be compared to Henchard, the character in Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Michael Henchard, drinks and decides to auction his wife and daughter for an offer of five guineas, but after a few years, he realises his mistake and moves to Casterbridge, in search of his wife and daughter. Similarly, Mohan realises his mistake and wishes to reconcile. He is indulgent and affectionate towards his sister Vimala. When he finds that she is not well, he becomes furious and yelps out looking at her illness and shouts with grief “why didn’t she tell us? Why didn’t she write to me?” (TLS 39). The unconditional love of Mohan for his sister Vimala helps Jaya understand her husband.

Therefore, Shashi Deshpande, through her characters Mohan and Jaya, stimulates spouses to be united with love and care despite problems in life. Her characterisation highlights the fact that human beings must have consideration and hope for one another and empathies with each other in order to understand the value of life.

Jaya feels that Mohan would be back and would also repent for his cruelty. She dreams that in the daytime his voice would follow her and will call her out ‘Jaya, Jaya’ over and over again. She imagines, in the dark, he would hold her close and say, ‘I didn’t mean it, you know I didn’t’. He would make love to me and ask me at the end of it –“Have I hurt you?” ‘No,’ I would reply and we would go on as before. The two of us growing gently, graciously, affectionately old together -the images filled me with pleasure” (TLS 127).

The above passage in the novel underlines the beauty of marital relationship that is obscure in couples and also intensifies the love that one has for the other. Jaya and Mohan finally understand that in all human relationships, the semblance of any given commitment is bound to vary with the point of time or view but the respect and love that human beings carry for one another must not be lost under any circumstances.

Jeeja, the maid servant, who works in Dardar flat, is confident and content by birth. No one can make her feel inferior or miserable without her consent and she never blames anyone for her miseries. She often expresses that everyone has his or her own purpose of life. Jeeja's husband hardly earns any money, but spends his wife's earnings and ill-treats her. She reaches the flat with brutal wounds, but never gets annoyed either with her husband or with her work as she strongly believes that her husband has his own reasons for his negative attitude and behaviour. She ascertains Jaya: "With whom shall I be angry? My parents didn't intend marrying me to a drunkard" (TLS 52). Her husband has been working in a mill at the time of their wedding but later he becomes a drunkard as he loses his job due to a strike. There is a transparency in Jeeja's silence and she is also a person who is emotionally mature in handling the problems. She waits for a positive change in her husband and never makes him feel low.

Jeeja's personality can be compared to Mrs. March in *Little Woman* by Louisa May Alcott. Mrs. March is a woman of patience. Joe, the daughter of Mrs. March, loses her temper on several occasions and goes uncontrolled. She asks her mother to give her some hints on controlling her anger. Mrs. March tells her daughter: "She has been trying to cure it for forty years and she has succeeded only in controlling it. She is angry nearly every day of her life, but she has learned not to feel it" (Alcott 75). Mrs. March and Jeeja seem to be more efficient in rationalising their words and deeds on all occurrences in life.

Jeeja is under her husband's thumb at home and is verbally abused every now and then. But she carries a great respect for him and treats him with humanity as Benjamin Franklin, an American author, advocates: "When you are good to others, you are best to yourself." Jeeja wants to be the best in what she does, and even when her husband gets married to the lady with whom he had an illegal affair, she decides not to lose her temperament and she keeps calm. Unfortunately, her husband's illegal wife dies of *tuberculosis*. Jeeja turns out to be the mother of Raja Ram, the son of her husband's illegal wife. Jeeja's husband also dies unexpectedly. Despite all these tragedies in her life, she keeps herself happy and moves on with her work. Jeeja's self-confidence and courage is proved through Jaya's words:

Jeeja was basically a realist. She badly needed the money she earned, she knew her value as a good worker, and she knew it was her reputation for reliability that enabled her to earn more than the other servants did. She was that rare thing among them - a pure professional, and proud of it. I knew her - her single-mindedness. She knew what her purpose in life was - it was to go on living. Enduring was part of it and so endured all that she had to. (TLS 51)

Jeeja is a symbol of loyalty, happiness and endurance because she never lies about others for her happiness and she respects herself for her endeavours and never gives away her positive attitude and esteems her purpose of life greatly.

Shashi Deshpande imparts to her readers through Jeeja that people must learn to adapt positive changes in order to experience a comfortable and contented life and most importantly people ought to be bold and confident to take right decisions in life. This quality can be associated with Spencer Johnson's book *Who moved my Cheese?* (1998), which advocates the concept of acknowledging the changes as inescapable and it must be confronted confidently. Through the characters Scurry and Sniff, the readers learn not to overanalyse the changes that happen in their lives but rather get inspired to treat changes with a positive outlook.

Thus, by projecting the evolution of positive qualities in Jaya, Mohan and Jeeja, Shashi Deshpande discusses the benefits of positivism in each one's life by reconnoitering and describing the different kinds of daily affairs of people and the problems they undergo in their lives. She teaches the readers to concentrate on the positive things in daily life situations as it will enhance the quality of their lives.

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