

## **CHAPTER - III**

### **ASSERTION OF SELF: *THAT LONG SILENCE***

The domestic life of the woman is a daily sacrifice of self to a thousand insignificant trifles. - Lenin

In *That Long Silence*, we have the protagonist Jaya speaking in the same tune when she describes how domestic trifles had kept her busy:

...gadgets that had to be kept in order, the glassware that had to sparkle, the furniture and curios that had to be kept spotless and dust-free, and those clothes. God, all those never-ending piles of clothes that had to be washed and ironed, so that they could be worn and washed and ironed once again.(25)

These are the things that a wife does throughout her life in almost every household of India. Jaya is but a representative of millions of women leading the same life style. Perhaps for this reason Shashi Deshpande is of the opinion about *That Long Silence* that it is almost entirely a woman's novel. It is a book about the silencing of one-half of humanity. She devoted a lifetime of introspection into the novel. It is also the one closest to her personally; the thinking and ideas in the novel are closest to her own.

Jaya is every woman. Both Jaya's experiences and her sensitiveness towards other women's experiences reveal the whole gamut of women's experiences. Jaya who shows that the subaltern can also speak out asserts her individuality at the end. If Mohan, her husband is antithesis of her life. Kamat, the do-gooder friend of Jaya is thesis for her life. She resolves the conflict between thesis and antithesis and finally follows the right track.

Jaya had been a pampered daughter of her father who shaped her life to make her different from others:

'You're going to be different from the others, Jaya,'... (136)

She had gone to English school and had dreamt of getting the Chatfield Prize or the Ellis Prize to go to Oxford after her graduation. She was named Jaya by her father –Jaya for victory. Untimely death of her father made her a burden in the family. Her brother had wanted her off his hands. He had wanted to be free of his responsibility for an unmarried

younger sister. So that he could go ahead with his own plans. When the proposal of marriage came for Jaya, she could not say what actually she wanted. Girls actually search for love and loving man. Like most of the girls it had been a vague and nebulous search of which she was not certain. But Mohan knew what he wanted: 'An educated, cultured wife.' When girls grow into young women they realize that it was actually marriage not love that was waiting for them. For women this game of waiting starts early in childhood:

*Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws' home. Wait until you have kids. (30)*

Similarly Jaya started waiting ever since she got married. On marriage there came prize advices from the elders. Vanitamami advised Jaya with her pithy unforgettable maxim: 'A husband is like a sheltering tree.'

Dada had said her 'Be good to Mohan, Jaya,' (138). But nobody had said what one should do when a marriage was over. So Jaya made wifehood her profession and invested her whole attention on Mohan and later on the children also. The women of Mohan's family had said on the post-wedding ceremonial game:

*The one who finds the coin first rules the other at home. (6)*

Jaya had found the coin but later understood it means nothing really. Their relationship had been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that they had even snipped off bits of themselves to keep the scales on an even keel. She had viewed them as:

*A pair of bullocks yoked together (7)*

Jaya's name was also changed by her husband. From marriage she got the name Suhasini, implying the tender, loving, forever caring and smiling woman. Jaya, the name had been her identity for so many years. No one can accept this sudden change of identity. But Jaya had been Suhasini as well distinct from Jaya by being a soft, placid, motherly woman. She was a woman who lovingly nurtured her family. She was a woman who coped.

As a result she passed her days in the thought of what she should make for breakfast/lunch/tea/dinner? That had been the *leit motif* of her life.

Jaya remained unaware when the process of change had set in and she had become a stereotype of woman:

I'm scared of cockroaches, lizards, nervous about electrical gadgets, hopeless at technical matter, lazy about accounting...almost the stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support. But what puzzles me is this: how did I get this way? I'm sure I wasn't always like this. I can remember a time when I was not so full of fears, when the unknown, when darkness and insects did not terrify me so. When did the process of change begin? (76)

After marriage Jaya started living as Mohan's wife and as Rahul's and Rati's mother. Not herself. It was true that she was a wife and a mother but she was something more-she had been a writer also. But she had cut off that self in order to please her husband. She was a budding writer but she left her writing career because of Mohan. Jaya had won a prize for a story that she had sent for a contest. Mohan had come home accusingly. He had wondered how she could write that story which revealed them. He had added:

They will all know now, all those people who read this and know us, they will know that these two persons are us, they will think I am this kind of a man, they will think I *am* this man. How can I look anyone in the face again? And you, how could you write these things, how could you write such ugly things, how will you face people after this? (143-144)

Jaya then had understood that Mohan was not angry but hurt as if she had wounded him. Jaya had realized that it hadn't mattered to Mohan that Jaya had written a good story- a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. For Mohan it had mattered that people might think the couple was them, that the man was him. For him she had been no writer, only an exhibitionist.

Jaya's argument to herself for leaving her writing career was that Mohan instead of forbidding her to write had shown his hurt and she had not been able to counter that and she had relinquished them instead. All those stories that had been taking shape in her could not be written because she had been scared - scared of hurting Mohan. She was afraid of jeopardizing the only career she had i.e. her marriage. Jaya had seen Mohan talking of family responsibility. On seeing women and children squatting in the street Mohan had said to Jaya:

Imagine, Jaya, people like us in that situation! (5)

He had also said:

Imagine putting your family in such a situation. It seems totally irresponsible to me. (6)

The irony is that he himself puts his family in such a situation. Jaya was stunned and remained silent on hearing about Mohan's business malpractice. Mistaking her silence for accusation, Mohan had reacted vehemently:

I did it for you, for you and the children? (10)

With this Jaya's 'career as a wife was in jeopardy.' (15) Mohan had taken for granted that Jaya might have different plans and asked her to move with him to their Dadar flat:

I remember now that he had assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I. Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails... (11)

Mohan had once advised Jaya how to remain safe in troubled times:

Don't you know it's better to come in and close the doors and windows at such a time? This time it was tear gas, next time it could be real bullets. Whenever you see crowds, or even a procession, just come in with children and close the doors – that's always safer. (55)

Same Mohan made Jaya feel: 'I know that safety is always unattainable. You're never safe'. (17)

How Jaya had once boasted that she knew Mohan better than he knew himself. It was because he had been her profession, her career and her means of livelihood. She had tried to pattern herself after the women of Mohan's family. So when something was not done well, or on time, a button missing, or a meal cooked badly, or too delayed, she had cringed in guilt. And when she had been praised for anything, she'd been so ridiculously pleased. She almost wagged her tail, like a dog that's been patted by its master.

Kamat had timely warned Jaya saying:

Don't try to act the martyr now. It's all your fault, You really enjoy it, don't you? (84)

He had been right to say that Jaya had been making others dependent on her. It increases her sense of power. He also said that that's what she really wanted. She was like all those bloody looking-after-others, caring-far-others women.

Jaya had compromised 'not for me, for my children'(113). In this way she solaced herself. But actually she was silenced both by Mohan and the deep-rooted belief-system in her mind ingrained by society. When once Jaya had got into a temper Mohan was not pleased for to him anger made a woman 'unwomanly' (83). He had said her that his mother never raised her voice against his father, however badly he behaved to her.

Ajji too had taught her not to displease her husband in any way.

Look at you- for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that? (27)

Jaya had indeed learnt to slip into silence. If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, Jaya was an ideal wife too. She bandaged her eyes tightly. She didn't want to know anything. It was enough for her that they moved to Bombay, that they could send Rahul and Rati to good schools, that she could have the things they needed- decent cloth, a fridge, a gas connection, travelling first class. And, there was enough for Mohan to send home to his father - for Sudha's fees, Vasant's clothes and Sudha's marriage.

Jaya had been very careful not to hurt Mohan's feelings even in bed. So after each act of sex to Mohan's question 'have I hurt you?'(98) She had answered 'No'.

I'd often wondered, what if I say 'yes'? What will that do to him? But I knew I would never say it. I could not. Even if I could no longer call it love, the emotion that governed my behaviour to him, there was still the habit of being a wife, of sustaining and supporting him, that made cruelty to him impossible. (98)

Jaya had always taken care not to disturb Mohan in any way. So after an act of sex when in an awful moment Jaya had realized that she was alone she had cried silently and despairingly. She was scared that she would wake Mohan up, trying desperately to calm herself.

Jaya had carried Rahul into the Kitchen when he used to wake up at night so that Mohan could sleep peacefully. Mohan used to be irritable when Rahul, never a contended, placid

baby, woke up and cried. So that she had carried Rahul into the kitchen when he woke up at night, and sat there, shutting the door behind her.

Enduring so much Jaya had learnt to be silent. Shashi Deshpande herself analyses the meaning of silence when she says that one learns a lot of tricks to get by in a relationship. Silence is one of them. A woman is never found criticizing her husband, even playfully, in case it might damage their relationship.

But the card-house of Jaya is blown by the stormy wind of Mohan's malpractice and his accusation that he did it for her and the children. For the first time in Dadar flat Jaya had been free to introspect. Suddenly she had realized that the pursuit of happiness is like a meaningless, unending exercise. It is like a puppy chasing its tail in vain.

Jaya had earlier thought:

The relation of man to woman is the most natural of one person to another. (158)

But now she realised that it's not natural but rather it is based on 'only treachery, only deceit, only betrayal.' (158)

Jaya and Mohan's ways of looking at things were different. Mohan talked of his mother saying she was tough. Women in those days were tough.

Their attitudes differed:

He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I was despair. I saw 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)

The same had been with Jaya who retreated into silence making it a kind of weapon. In the first months of Jaya's pregnancy when she could not bear the smell of oil and spices she had asked him 'why don't you do the cooking today?' (81) He could not think of cooking even if his wife was sick. He had not changed even after passing years with Jaya. So when Jaya had gone to their Churchgate flat to collect the mail and came late, she had found that he had not thought to save her trouble by making any preparations for dinner.

Day after day Jaya had cleared up after each meal. She used to get respite from the drudgery only by her servants. As she said:

This drudgery was something I'd forgotten since Sadu came to us as a live-in servant. (80)

Elsewhere she says:

It was Jeeja and her like I needed; it was these women who saved me from the hell of drudgery: Any little freedom I had depended on them. (52)

But with Kamat it was different.

He hadn't seemed to mind being found doing something that was to me unwomanly. On the contrary, he had been proud of his cooking ability, he had bragged about it (152)

To him it was very natural. He had asked Jaya if she had noticed how the women make the men totally dependent and helpless in practical, everyday living by doing everything for them.

Jaya had stared at him with unself-consciousness. His idea of sex was also radically different. He said he didn't want to concede to any woman power over him. But he admitted that in the field of sex he conceded the power to women.

Mohan could not accept when Jaya had written the story of the couple. For him how Jaya could reveal themselves to people. For Kamat it was very easy to talk about sex. Until Jaya met Kamat she had seen men to put on a different face, a different tone, a false smile when they spoke to her.

But this man...it had been a revelation to me that two people, a man and a woman, could talk this way. 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. There had been nothing I could not say to him. And he too... (153)

Kamat had become so much friendly with Jaya that she confided in him. She told him things that she should never been able to speak of, not to Dada, not to Mohan. She had been talking about her parents to him.

Mohan had proposed Jaya to write:

“Middles”-‘light, humorous pieces about the travails of a middle-class housewife. Nothing serious...oh no, nothing serious.’ (149)

Thus ‘Seeta’ had been borne by Jaya whom Mohan had loved and so had the editor. For Jaya Seeta had been the means through which she had shut the door, firmly, on all those other women who had invaded her being, screaming for attention. They were the women she had known whom she could not write about, because they might-it was just possible-resemble Mohan’s mother, or aunt, or her mother or aunt. ‘Seeta’ was safer. She didn’t have to come out of the safe hole she’d crawled into to write about ‘Seeta’. She could stay there, warm and snug.

Unlike Mohan Kamat had hated Seeta:

Don’t saddle me with the burden of having fathered that ....that obnoxious creation of yours. (149)

He had warned her to beware of her ‘women are the victims’ theory. He had said it would drag her down into a soft, squishy bog of self-pity. She should take herself seriously. She should not sulk behind a false name. Rather she should work if she wanted others to take her seriously. He said scribbling now and then would take her nowhere.

While anger was quite unwomanly to Mohan, Kamat had suggested to use anger in her story. He wondered that there was no anger in her stories. There wasn’t even a personal view or a personal vision. He pointed out that her story was too restrained which should not be. She should spew out her anger in her writing. She should not hold in her anger. Until then Jaya had thought or made to believe that a woman can never be angry. She can only be neurotic, hysterical and frustrated. There was no room for anger in her life. There was no room for despair either. There was only order and routine like one day she has to change the sheets; another day she has to scrub the bathroom; yet another day she has to clean the fridge.

Thus Kamat had been a guiding star for Jaya’s writing career as well as a catalyst to make her understand the calling of her heart. In spite of Jaya’s every care to nourish her relationship with Mohan, he has not spared her to raise his finger of accusation at her. He claimed that since the day he told her what Agarwal had said to him, she had been totally indifferent. He also added that she had always been that way. Mohan attacked her for falling into the C.E.’s clutches. In order to get Type C Quarters for Jaya, he had become a

prey at the C.E.'s hand. Jaya had thought it had happened naturally. Mohan accused Jaya that she did not care how all that happened. She had been selfish to look after her own needs. Beyond that nothing mattered to her. But Mohan was saying partial truth. It was Mohan who had been too ambitious; Jaya had just acquiesced with him. She had even cut her hair when Mohan had wanted it:

'cut your hair, up to here' 'like Mehra's wife.' (196)

She was her normal self but he had wanted her in different way:

Buy yourself a couple of good saris, (61)

He had said:

Don't wear those shabby things, even at home. And why don't you make yourself a nice housecoat-you know, like the one the M.D.'s daughter wears. (61)

Jaya had obeyed him in every respect only to hear that Jaya remained unconcerned after what happened to Mohan. While Mohan had been going through hell and had been worried to death since Agarwal warned him about what was likely to happen. Jaya seemed not to bother about it. Mohan even brought insignificant things to hurt her. But it was not the truth for Jaya. Mohan was her husband 'around whose needs and desires my own life revolved.'(24) She had been caring about him all the time. He was wrong for the habit of caring cannot be abandoned or misplaced. Rather it is very hard to get rid of. So each accusation had only bewildered Jaya. When Mohan accused 'you've never cared for me' (124) Jay wondered:

Then what have I been doing, living with him all these years? (124)

Though Jaya's feelings for him had had their beginning in the act of sex, it had grown like a monster child over the years. She had lived in a constant panic that Mohan would die. She had clung to him at night, feeling with relief the warmth of his body, stroking his chest, letting her palms move with his even leap breaths. The thought of living without him had twisted her insides. His death had seemed to her the final catastrophe. The very idea of his dying had made her feel so bereft that tears had flowed effortlessly down her cheeks. If he had been a little late coming home, she had been sure he was dead. By the time he returned, she had, in her imagination, shaped her life to a desolate widowhood.

Widowhood which all Hindu women fears and fasts like Mukta though she had forfeited its purpose:

..., the purpose of all Hindu women's fasts- the avoidance of widowhood. (67)

Jaya remembers Kamlakaki who had been frantic after Laxmankaka's death.

How will I live without him, Jaya, how will I live? She had cried out to me when I had gone to see her after Laxmankaka's death, her hands clutching mine in a painful grip. (132)

Jeeja, Jaya's servant had uttered a similar cry on Rajaram's hospitalization. Thinking about her daughter-in-law she had said:

And that girl, let her have her *kumkum* on her forehead. What is a woman without that? Her husband may be a drunkard, but as long as he is alive, no one will dare cast an eye on her. If he dies... she is young and foolish... (160)

It was Jeeja who had reminded Jaya her position, when she had asked Jaya to talk to Dr. Vyas for Rajaram's better treatment. She had said that Jaya should just talk to the doctor and he would remember her. He will listen to her for her husband is a big officer and she was his wife.

The words had reverberated in her ears:

You are his wife... (161)

Once as a child Jaya had visited Bombay. On her visit Jaya had written her name in the beach, taking infinite care over the writing. She was just stunned. There was just blankness; the sea had crashed everything leaving no trace of her name. She'd been astonished to see nothing there. Jaya's profession was similarly about to be engulfed by time's fell hand. Dr. Vyas too reminded Jaya how she was known to people. He had said he would be expecting her call. Jaya had reflected that even Dr. Vyas had asked her to visit them with her husband. She wondered what he meant by that. Was it impossible for her to relate to the world without Mohan?

This is precisely what happens with Indian women. They are known by their husband's identity. Change of surname and even the name testify this. Ramukaka's family tree shows how women are obliterated at the parental home's family saga. Ramukaka had

shown Jaya the family tree where he had gone back to nearly two hundred years. Seeing only men there Jaya had inquisitively exclaimed that she was not there in that family tree.

Ramukaka irritatingly had answered:

How can you be here? You don't belong to this family! you're married. You're now part of Mohan's family. You have no place here. (143).

Mohan too was of the same opinion that her Ramukaka was right. He said that she belonged to Mohan's family after marriage.

But Jaya had seen that not only she and the girls of the family but also all the women married into the family had been blotted out. She'd wanted to ask Ramukaka, if she shouldn't belong to that family, what about the Kaki's and Ai? They married into that family, but still they were not there. She found that Aiji, who single-handedly kept the family together, too wasn't there.

The fact is that women are taken as non-entity only to be used as commodity deprived of their true place in family and society. Jaya had read somewhere an account of how baby girls were killed a century or so back. They were buried alive, crushed to death in the same room where they were born. Immediately after a fire was lit on that spot-to sanctify that place. It was done perhaps to ensure death. Comparing her painful agonies over the years with their death, Jaya had thought that she had been unable to get those agonies out of her mind. She wondered whether the swift ending of the agony once and for all wasn't more merciful than the prolonging of it for years and years.

Jaya recalls Nayana's wisdom in craving for a male child. Nayana did not want to give birth to a girl as the girl would have to suffer because of men all her life.

Being alone in the Dadar flat Jaya had shivered at the consequences if Mohan deserts her. Jaya had likewise left Kusum in that flat while Kusum had cried to Jaya not to leave her there. She earnestly requested her to stay with her.

Jaya had left her in the care of Jeeja and had gone back to her husband and children leaving Kusum behind. Thinking of her desolate condition Jaya now thought that people do not have to wait for another life for their punishment. It was all reserved for them right then and there. An act of retribution-they followed each other naturally and inevitably. Dasarath killed an innocent young boy whose parents died crying out for their son. And,

years, later, Dasarath died too, calling out for his son, 'Rama, Rama.' (128) Jaya thought that escape is never possible for people, however, we fight to flout it.

Similarly Jaya could not escape the inquisitive eyes of her neighbours. While they stayed in their Dadar flat it was taken naturally by others, Nilima's grandmother had questioned why they had come there. The woman also hinted that after Kamat's death she had thought Jaya would not go there.

Jaya then realized:

Now, with my eyes open, I found out that the world had been looking at me all the while. (65)

Jaya, a failed wife finally talks of her failure with Mukta, she wishes to believe in rebirth. To her rebirth gives one a chance to redeem the failures of this life. But Mukta makes it clear that being born again is in itself a failure. The real goal or the success remains in not to be born at all. Jaya discusses with her about Mohan's dishonesty but finds Mukta was not listening to her. She questioned why Jaya had left Kamat dying alone. She said she could have stayed. She also asked if it was because she was frightened of what anyone especially of what Mohan would say. But Mohan didn't know anything of it. While writing stumbling over the words, Jaya suddenly realised-it was not Mohan but marriage that had made her circumspect. Jaya was very much scared to harm her marriage.

Jaya's turmoil of married life had been further aggravated by her son Rahul's escapade. But the storm is pacified when Rahul returns with his uncle Vasant and a telegram comes from Mohan:

All well returning Friday morning (189)

By this time Jaya had found herself looking as a girl child, with her hands thrust in the pockets of her dress. She was excited to find the unexpected resources within herself. Now she thought of beginning with the child. All these years Jaya had been scared of breaking through the veneer of a happy family. Once the creativity is active in Jaya, she gathers courage to look at things differently. She found that the panic was gone. She had thought that she was Mohan's wife and cut off the bits of herself that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now she knew that kind of a fragmentation was not possible. The child, hands in pockets, had been with her through the years. She was still with her.

Her outlook now changes:

Two bullocks yoked together- that was how I saw the two of us the day we came here, Mohan and I; 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. I've always thought-there's only one life, no chance of a reprieve, no second chances. But in this life itself there are so many crossroads, so many choices? (191-192)

Jaya remembers that she had seen the Sanskrit words 'Yatecchsi tatha Kuru'-in her father diary. Ramukaka had told her that the line was from *Bhagwadgita*:

With this line, after all those millions of world of instruction, Krishna confers humanness on Arjuna. 'I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire.' (192)

The meaning opens the knot for Jaya. She finds the answer to Jeeja's question.

With whom shall I be angry?

With myself, of course? (192)

Now Jaya knows:

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 Sanskrit 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-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 what I've been doing all these years. I have been speaking Prakrit myself. (193)

And the novel ends with Jaya's words:

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 I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible. (193)

The novel is about breaking silence and asserting Jaya's individuality. Silence can never settle dispute whereas dialogues can. But in Indian milieu lots of women are silenced and

most of them do not find any impetus to break the silence when they are forced to remain so. The epigraph at the beginning of the novel acquiesces with the theme of the novel:

If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy-the weight of that long silence of one-half the world.  
*Elizabeth Robins, in a speech to the WWSL, 1907*

The world has always tried to suppress one half of humanity. Now it's the responsibility of women like Jaya to come out of their exile. The novel reminds Bhikaiji Cama's words in Egypt:

I see here the representatives of only half the population of Egypt. May I ask where is the other half? Sons of Egypt? where are the daughters of Egypt? Where are your mothers and sisters, your wives and daughters?

- *Bhikaiji Cama of India*, at a meeting of the Egyptian National Congress at Brussels in 1910 (Kaur 1985: 102).