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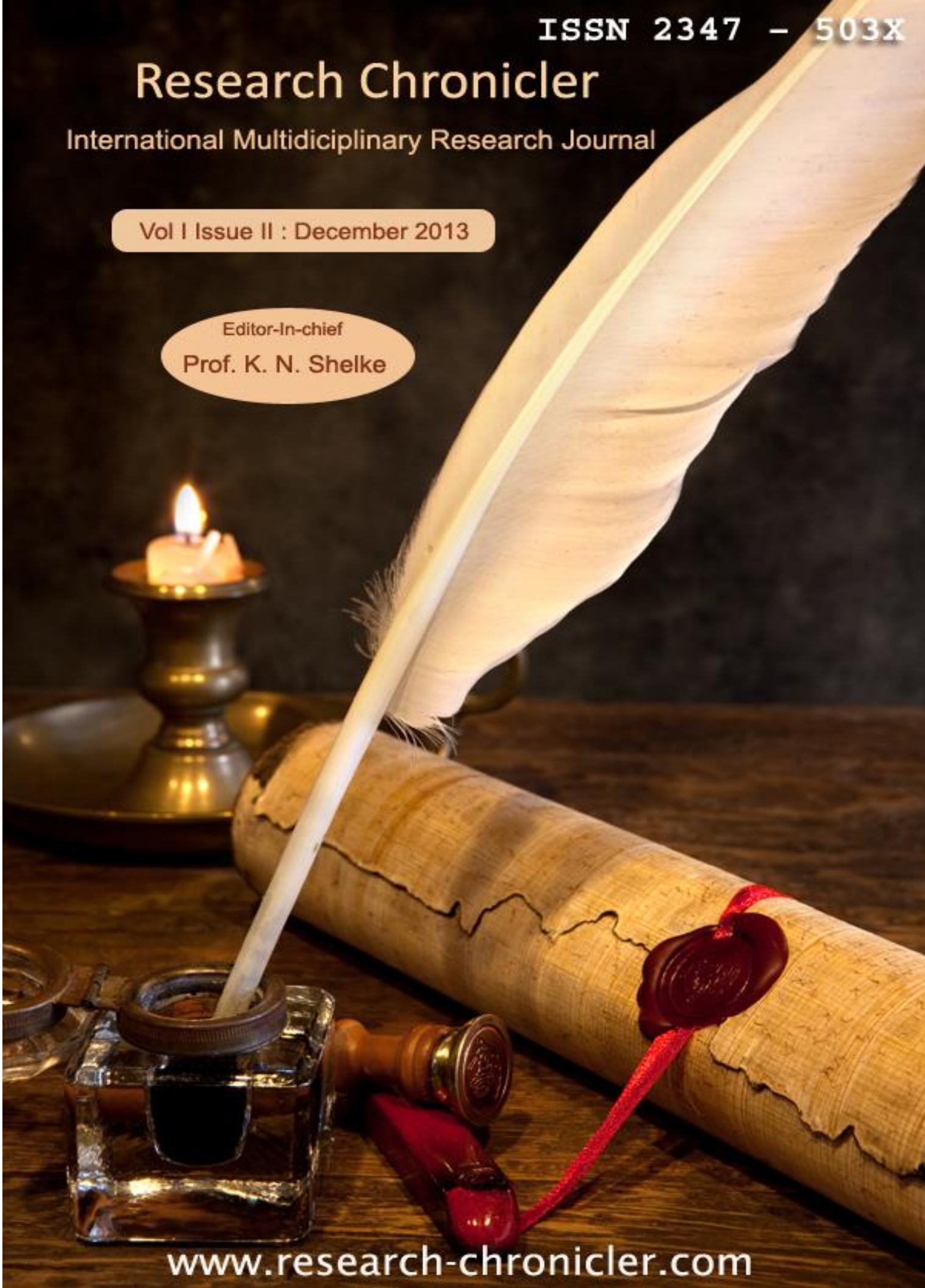
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**Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*:
A Study of Assertion and Emotional Explosion**

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* explores the struggle of middle class modern educated and career oriented woman to get an identity in the man dominated society. She highlights the rebel of women in search for freedom and identity within the cultural norms without reinterpreting them. Her dilemmas are unfolded very brilliantly and minutely here. Alienation and paralysis of self in the oppressive and female corrosive system that family system imposes are presented in a nice manner. The novel holds family as a system responsible for the backwardness of women in the society. For a happy peaceful life a compromise is suggested by Deshpande. Mutual understanding between husband and wife is needed for a meaningful married life. The noble position of a woman in the family cannot be ignored for the welfare of the society.

Keywords: Submission, Silence, Rebel, Realization, Compromise.

Shashi Deshpande very excellently projects the graphic picture of the middle class modern educated and career oriented woman who is struggling hard for the recognition in her prestigious Sahitya Academy award winning novel, *That Long Silence*. Her honest attempt for highlighting the turmoil, convulsions, frustrations, endurance and long silence of women is depicted in her novels.

The novel unfolds the hopes, fears, aspirations, frustrations and finally triumphs over huddles of life of the protagonist, Jaya. Suman Ahuja remarks that Jaya caught in an emotional eddy, endeavours to come to

terms with her protean roles, while trying albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self, which is but a ephemera of unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer. (Ahuja 2) Jaya desperately hovers between submission and assertion. The suffering of woman is seen in the statement of Jaya to Kamat:

Have you ever heard of an angry young woman?...A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. (TLS 147)

The novel expresses the silence of the modern Indian wife. The inner conflict and dilemma of Jaya and her quest for the self

are exposed in this novel. Despande observes:

That Long Silence almost entirely a woman's novel never the less a book about the silencing of our half of the humanity. A life time of introspection went into this novel. (Prasad 58)

Jaya tries her best to get her own identity which seems to be lost somewhere during seventeen years of her marriage. She finds complete restriction in her married life.

She says to Mukta.... nothing between me and Mohan either. We lived together but there had been only emptiness between us. (TLS 185)

The Silence between Jaya and her husband further brings pain in her life. S.P. Swain remarks:

A sensitive and realistic dramatization of the married life of Jaya and her husband Mohan, it [That husband Silence] portrays an inquisitive critical appraisal to which the institution of marriage has been subjected to in recent years. (Swain 87)

The relationship between Jaya and her husband is mechanical and forced one. There is a lack of emotion and passion in their married life:

A pair of bullock joked together... A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhere like the one caught and preserved for

posterity by advertising visuals I so loved. But the reality was only this. We were two persons A man. A woman. (TLS 8)

Jaya is a modern woman rooted in tradition while her husband is completely a traditionalist and has a firm faith in customs. They have different outlooks of life and hence they are unable to understand each other. Mohan finds the strength of a woman in sitting before the fire, waiting for her husband to come home and eat hot food, but Jaya considers this the result of helplessness. The chief cause of the failure to understand each other is the two different attitudes of them. Their marital life becomes shaky and gloomy due to the lack co-ordination between them. Mohan wants to marry a girl who is very dynamic and has a dashing personality. He finds that his desire is going to be fulfilled after the marriage with Jaya. He tells Jaya:

You know, Jaya the first day I met you Kamukaka's house, you were taking to your brother, Dinkar, and some now you sounded so much like that girl. I think it was at that moment that I decided I would marry you. (TLS 90)

The marriage of Jaya to Mohan is arranged by the elders of the two families. Their married life began happily and smoothly. She accepts the new name Suhasini after her marriage just to keep her husband happy. She dresses herself according to the taste of her husband. She has simply suppressed her desire as she has been trained the importance and necessity of stable marriage and family – family as

security, as a source of emotional strength. (Uma 4) She recalls the advice of Vanitamami:

A husband is like a sheltering tree... without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable. (TLS 32)

To save her career as a wife she wants to produce her creative writings but Mohan does not allow her to do so. Finally Jaya decides to give up the idea of writing to keep her marital relationship intact. She starts writing for the newspapers which is not objectionable to Mohan. Jaya utters:

I had relinquished them instead, all those stories that had been taken shape in me because I had been scared – scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had my marriage. (TLS 144)

Jaya passes through the rough road of her nuptial life and finds that: “no questions, no retorts: only silence”. She realizes that her condition is like Sita or Draupadi. She expresses her view:

The truth is that it was Mohan, who had a clear idea of what he wanted; the kind of life he to lead, the kind of home he would live in, and I went along with him. (TLS 25)

In the words of Indra Mohan:

She breaks herself self-imposed prison wall of mind and chooses to remain in the family at the same time comes out of the confining slots allotted to her by the patriarchal society. (Mohan 117)

Jaya knows well that her husband needs only her freshness of body not her soul at all. He desires that “you haven't put on my weight. Most women get shapeless at your age. You're still the way you were when we got married.” (TLS 85)

Her relationship with her husband is based on sex without any ray of love. Jaya has found herself alienated and isolated. Her marital life is full of stress and strain but she bears it with silence that needs to be broken to recover from the female stasis. We are reminded here Alfred Tennyson's poem, The Princess, Where he expresses the condition of women in the family.

Man for the field and woman for the hearth. Man for the sword and for the needle she, Man with the head and women with the heart; Man to command and woman to obey. All else confusion. (Mundra and Mundra 2009)

Jaya carries out her marital responsibility excellently obeying the commands of her husband and bestows her intense love on him but in return she gets waiting only. Waiting has become a routine affair for her. She declares:

Ever since I got married, I had 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, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch carrier man. (TLS 30)

After the suspension of Mohan on a charge of bribery the relationship between husband and wife becomes bitter. Mohan

has lost his interest in her. She is brooding over the latest, development in the case of Mohan. She becomes highly emotional and afraid lest any unhappy thing should happen to Mohan. Her life would be meaningless without Mohan:

The very idea of his dying had made me feel so bereft that tears had flowed effortlessly down my cheeks. If he had been a little late coming home, I had been sure he was dead. By the time he returned, I had, in my imagination shaped my life to a desolated widowhood. (TLS 96-97)

Now, Jaya realizes that she is not equal to Mohan in status. Mohan at first holds Mr. Agarwal responsible for his suspension but later he accepts that whatever he did was for the welfare of his wife and children. Mohan defends himself complaining: It was for you and the children that I did this. I wanted you to have a good wife. I wanted the children to have all those things I never had. (TLS 9) Jaya listening to his remarks become helpless and feels humiliated. Gradually Jaya tries her best to adjust herself in the terrible situation getting transformed. Traditionally she wants to be loyal to her husband blindly but her education warns her that she should not encourage Mohan in his wrong deeds. Mohan's sister informs her about his mother's death in an attempt to short an unwanted pregnancy. Her sister also leaves this world due to an ovarian turnover. The story of silent suffering is further seen in the story of Kusum. She is deserted and left alone by her husband and she passes away unlamented. Jaya is neither able to

oppose her husband nor in a position to disobey him.

When Mohan leaves Jaya and informs her that he would never come back in her life she becomes painful and has undergone a traumatic experience. She has been shocked and consequently loses her mental balance. Her tragedies increase when she gets the news of her son's disappearance. She has to face the agony of separation alone. No one is there to support her at this critical juncture. The crisis makes Jaya strong and she wants to face the problem boldly. Jaya starts assessing herself and recalls her faults. The moral lapses as a wife also come before her eyes. She resolves to look at her whole past life as an open book. Jaya remembers the demise of her father when she is left by Mohan. She becomes afraid of the insecurity of her life as she has experienced after her father's death. She further recalls the moment Rahul remarks when she has been impatiently waiting for Mohan, "he must be dead somewhere. (TLS 157)

She again remembers how her brother, Dada, has left them leaving for America. The sudden departure of Mohan makes Jaya in a retrospective mood. She becomes alone and helpless.

But what happened when everyone went out and you were left alone inside?... why hadn't they warned me that the threat, the hazard, lay inside? A wave of sickness overcame me and I found myself longing for someone to come and comfort me. (TLS 131)

Leena, her college friend helps her coming out from depression and loneliness

but after knowing the fact that she is close to a married men she leaves her.

I am sorry, Leena, I was stupid, naïve, ignorant. I was a narrow minded idiot and the kind of person you were was beyond my comprehension then. Forgive me Leena. (TLS 141)

Jaya even in hard times keeps herself attached to her conventional life style. But she has lost her identity after marriage. She wants to become:

a woman in crisp cotton Sari, with huge dark glasses, shaped eyebrows and short hair all about me. If I ever wanted to be like others. (TLS 188)

Remembering the family tree she becomes shocked as her name is not mentioned in it. When she wants to know the reason of her absence in the family tree she is informed that now she is in the family of Mohan.

How can you be here? You don't belong to this family. You have no place here. (TLS 43)

She is bewildered to notice that even her mother and all the other women of her father's household are not mentioned in the family tree. It shows the gross gender discrimination in the man dominated society. Jaya narrates her feelings to Mukta regarding her relationship with Mohan:

All those years I thought I was Mohan's wife: now he tells me I was never that not really. What am I going to do? What shall I do if he doesn't come back? Mukta, I was so confident, so sure of myself, I feel so superior to others ... and now, without

Mohan, I'm ... I don't know, I don't know what I am. (TLS 189)

Mukta believes that her problems with Mohan are due to Kamat. She asks Jaya why she has left Kamat when she sees him dead. She tells her that she should not have left Kamat. But Jaya declares that there is nothing between them and now there is nothing between Mohan and herself also.

When Jaya gets the telegram of Mohan regarding his coming back, she starts thinking whether they would return to their normal peaceful life. She says:

...he will come back and give me a carefully edited version of what has happened... as he has done so often till now and then ask me, what do you say, Jaya. (TLS 192)

Jaya finally decides not to be silent any longer. She hopes:

If Mohan returns, I thought if only Rahul and Rati came back, we can begin living afresh. (TLS 182)

She realizes that a peaceful happy marital life can be achieved only through mutual understanding and tolerance and respect to each other. Sarala Parker remarks:

The important insight that Shashi Deshpande imparts to us through Jaya is that women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their victimization instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves. (Parker 40)

The married life of Jaya has lost its fragrance and freshness. Obviously she

never thinks to keep herself away from the bond of marriage or to take a divorce. Above all she, the mouth piece of Shashi Deshpande, is always in favor of a compromise and she is able to make her husband realize that she has to be treated on an equal footing. The novel is a beautiful tale of Jaya's solitary crusade against the deafening silence that has entrapped the women of middle class Indian society. According to Narasaiah "Jaya speaks not like a woman liberated from the burdens of either her humanity or her womanhood, but a woman redefining her existential situation in her own terms, having it out 'on her own premises.'" (Narasaiah 136)

Another traditionally suppressed woman is Vanitamami. Her mother in law dominates on her life after marriage. She has to keep silent in any family decision and becomes a passive figure in the family. Kusum has also to play a passive role in the family. The innocent victim becomes insane as she has internalized her anger. Feeling herself as a burden she commits suicide. Mukta, Jaya's neighbour, works under financial crisis. She, though widow, looks after her old mother-in-law and a small daughter, Neelima. She proves her capability to face the adverse situation but she is absolutely unable to overcome superstitions. She has a firm desire to make her daughter far away from superstitious beliefs. Her husband has not treated her well and never given her affection as she cannot produce a son.

Women are explored as a victim and suffer in this novel. Mohan's mother received the ill treatment of her husband.

The dominant husband desires fresh food to be presented when he comes back home at any moment. Failure to serve him fresh chutney late one night makes him angry. The plate has been thrown at the wall and left without eating. Mohan's mother gathers the plate, washes the wall and obediently she prepares another meal. Mohan remarks that "her mother was tough. Women in those days were tough." (TLS 198) Mohan's mother and his sister Vimala both have hard times in their lives. Vimala follows the path of her mother silently as Jaya pin-points:

I can see something in common between them something that links the destinies of the two... the silence in which they died. (TLS 39)

They are a silent sufferers and they leave this world without a word of protest. The lives of Jeeja and Nayana, the house maids of Jaya, are further painful. Being illiterate they do not get food jobs and hence they are not satisfied with their earnings. Nayana wants a son as she does not want to see her daughter in the same fate. Nayana tells her helplessness to Jaya:

Why give birth to a girl, behnji who'll only suffer because of men all her life? Look at me! My mother loved me very much, she wanted so much for me... a house with electricity and water, shining brass vessels, a silver waist chain, silver anklets ...and what have I got? No, no, behnji, better to have a son. (TLS 28)

The fate of Jeeja is the same as her husband too is a drunkard and she is always beaten by him. She bears the agony silently and never complains. She willingly accepts

his second marriage as she cannot produce a child. She says “with whom shall I be angry”. (TLS 52) The life of Tara is also full of pain and miseries. Her husband, Rajaran, is a drunkard and his behaviour with her is very inhuman. Refusing to hand over her earning to her husband makes her victim of torture. She becomes hopeless and frustrated. Her miseries compel her to say:

He may drunkards die... but this one won't. He'll torture usual to death instead. (TLS 53)

Through the mouth of Jeeja Shashi Deshpande expresses the importance of a husband for a lady “what is a woman without that”. (TLS 53) P.D. Nimsarkar remarks: “Deshpande is concerned with people, the women and their relationship

with others, like husbands, parents, children, and sons and daughters. She has faithfully tried to construct womanhood in the contemporary context, society and the world. (Nimsarkar 114)

To conclude the novel explores the suffering and deprivations of women in India. Shashi Deshpande would like to suggest that in this transitional period a complete revolt is not needed instead a gradual change in the society is required. The gap between tradition and modernity must be bridged. The message of this novel is that women should accept their own responsibility and their role in the family. The novel stresses on the awareness of woman, gender discrimination and the struggle against man dominated society.

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