

Portrayal of Women in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

That Long Silence, published in 1988, deals with human relationships. It was an instant success and won her the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990. In this novel Shashi Deshpande graphically depicts the mental renaissance of her protagonist Jaya, a writer and a house wife and her drifting away from the conventional image. It is an exceptionally accomplished portrayal of the protagonist who is trying to erase her 'long silence' that begun in childhood and rooted in herself and in the constraints of her life. Jaya wants to speak out and to break the long silence which has prevented her for so long from bridging the gap of communication between herself and her husband.

Key Words:-Self-realization, Middle class Women, Identity

That Long Silence is a novel of despair and resignation of women. The story unfolds with Jaya struggling for words to write the story of Mohan and herself. She finds herself disrupted when she comes to know the fact that her husband's reputation is in question as allegations have been levelled against him for malpractices in his job. They shift to their old flat in Dadar, Bombay from their well-furnished home at Church gate to escape the scene of investigation. She gets bored due to her monotonous life there. Doing the same thing every day had become unbearable to her and she is haunted by the memories of the past. The story moves forward with Jaya's nostalgia of her married life and its frustration. "Jaya finds her normal routine so disrupted that for the first time she can look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is," ⁽¹⁾ says Adele King in her book-review.

While probing into her past she thinks she was named Jaya by her father which stands for 'victory'. After her marriage she was named Suhasini which was 'distinct from Jaya', and stood for 'a soft, smiling, placid

motherly woman'. ⁽²⁾ If we try to correlate her names with her personality, her first name Jaya symbolizes revolt while the other Suhasini symbolizes submission. It is not only the change of her identity but also of her personality. She is reminded how her anger in her childhood "...meant very little. Ai had taken them with equanimity, Ravi with total indifference, and Appa and dada with genuine amusement." (82) But after her marriage her first quarrel with Mohan had been earth-shaking. She realized that to Mohan "anger made a woman 'unwomanly'." (83) Mohan tells her about his mother, "My mother never raised her voice against my father however badly he behaved to her." (83) He had told her about his father's misbehaviour with his mother. She found it painful but his comment on it was strange. According to him, 'she was tough'. (36) "He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw a 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) In Mohan's house she was

made to realize that she had power and her anger had shattered him. "It was then that I had realized my awesome power over him. Now it astonished me ... how could I have been so stupid?" (82) And then she is reminded of the power of women in both her maternal and paternal home: "Hadn't I seen that phenomenon, the power of woman, in my own family? My two ajjis, two entirely different women, had been alike in the power they had wielded over their families." (82)

Though once she had rejected to follow the image of traditional women like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, she tries to adapt herself according to the wishes, likes and dislikes of her husband. She considers women of her house to be incompetent in comparison to women of Mohan's house. She is full of contempt and starts despising women of her own family. "It was when I first visited his home that I had discovered how sharply defined a woman's role was. They had been a revelation to me, the women in his family, so definite about their roles, so well trained in their duties, so skilful in the right areas, so indifferent to everything else. I had never seen so clear, so precise a pattern before and I had been entranced by it." (83) And she decides to pattern herself after them. She gave up her writing because of Mohan. He was not happy even when her story was published and won her a prize, instead he was sorry and he felt hurt because he thought people might correlate it with their (Mohan & Jaya's) personal life. She feels that to Mohan she is not a 'writer' but 'only an exhibitionist'. She does not give any explanation to him; instead she feels guilty that she had hurt him, and finally, surrendering in front of his desires, she stops writing and feels disillusioned. She does so to save her married life. She feels hurt, crushed as a woman and a writer and

deeply distressed due to Mohan's discouragement for her writings. "I had relinquished them instead, all those stories that had been taking shape in me because I had been scared ... scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had, my marriage." (144) But what she got by doing all this ... nothing, as she says, "I had shaped myself so resolutely to his desires all these years, yet what was I left with now? Nothing. Just emptiness and silence." (144) She faced many problems in publishing her stories as male editors/publishers did not take interest in her writings and rejected her story by calling it 'middle-class stuff, women's problems' and 'too distanced from real life, real problems' and advised her to consult 'a women's magazine.' (146 – 147) She expresses her anger near Kamat who points out that her writings lacked personal view and personal vision and he advises her to use her anger in her writings. When he asks her why she did not use it there and why was she holding it in, she says just like an ideal Indian woman, "Because 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. There's no room for anger in my life, no room for despair, either. There's only order and routine ... today, I have to change the sheets; tomorrow, scrub the bathrooms; the day after, clean the fridge..." (147 – 148) Kamat's reply is also remarkable here: when she tries to escape by saying that she does not have the time for writing, he says mocking at her, "Yes, that's an easy way out. It's so much easier to be the martyr who'd have done so much if only ... "if only I had the time. But I'm a wife and mother first, my home and children come first to me... blah blah blah" Pah! The fact is you're

scared... Scared of writing. Scared of failing.” (148)

Jaya is in search of a refuge where she can hide herself because she is unable to bear all this anymore. Shashi Deshpande uses the imagery of a woman crawling into a hole to show the status of Jaya. “Even a woman has a hole it can crawl into. I had mine — as Mohan’s wife, as Rahul’s and Rati’s mother.” (148) She dwindles into a stereo-type Indian housewife according to her husband’s desire. It seems as if her identity lies only in being someone’s wife and someone’s mother. She realizes how she started writing light, humorous pieces about the travails of a middle-class housewife and nothing serious because through this kind of writing she “had shut the door firmly, on all those other women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention; women I had known I could not write about, because they might ... it was just possible ... resemble Mohan’s mother, or aunt, or my mother or aunt.” (149) So she started her fortnightly ‘Seeta’ story, feeling it safer because she did not want to come out of the safe hole she had crawled into. She stops even this story of ‘Seeta’ after shifting to Dadar and feels a change in herself: “Looking through these diaries, I realized, was like going backwards. As I burrowed through the facts, what I found was the woman who had once lived here. Mohan’s wife. Rahul’s and Rati’s mother. Not myself.” (69) She is unable to relate herself to her old self reflected through the diary.

When she watches her son, Rahul, talking easily and intimately to his uncle, Vasant, she thinks resentfully, “Why can’t he be this way with me, with us?” (189) Just like Sarita’s daughter in “The Dark Holds No Terrors,” Jaya’s daughter Rati is also a difficult one. “And there was Rati, Rati

mocking at me, jeering at me from behind the cardboard cut-out figure of my daughter I had propped up ... a girl, grave, serious, independent, understanding ...” (173) And she considers herself “unfit to be trusted with the entire responsibility of another human being. How had I dared to take it on? Mohan’s wife, Rahul’s and Rati’s mother ...I can crawl into that hole, I had thought, a warm and safe hole; but there I was now prodded out of it by cruel, sharp staves.” (173) She feels despairingly that she has failed in performing her duty as a wife and as a mother. She is torn between her quest of her own identity, her career as a writer and her duty as a wife and a mother. She had a desire to rise and touch the height of her career as well as to be an ideal woman, wife and mother.

But she neither revolts nor compromises like Sarita in ‘**The Dark Holds No Terrors**’ and her desire to be an ideal woman overpowers her yearning to be a successful writer at last. Maria Mies rightly puts it that “the career woman has not only to face the opposition of her surroundings and to struggle against many objective obstacles, but she is often divided in herself because she also often subscribes to the Indian idea of womanhood. Her problems arise, firstly, from the contradictions between this image and the demand of a new social situation and then from the discrepancy between new aspirations and lack of opportunity.”⁽³⁾ She is reminded of Mohan’s exaggerated reaction to an incident and his comment that ‘people like us’ were in very pitiable condition. She understood what he meant by ‘people like us’. He meant, “Well-educated, hard-working people in secure jobs, cushioned by insurance and provident funds, with two healthy, well-fed children going to good schools.” (5) For others it might have been a happy

family just like ads but in reality it was as imaginary as fairy tales for Jaya in which people 'live happily ever after.'

Though being an educated woman she had her own desire and ambition, she always tried to give her best to her family and have a good relationship with her husband. It was in her blood and mind as she was taught and trained by both male and female members of her family to be good to Mohan and to keep him happy. She was told by Vanitamami, "A husband is like a sheltering tree." (32) Ramu Kaka told her, "...the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you..." (138) And she thinks mockingly how "(Dada and I had wondered whether they'd (Vanitamami's relatives) told her (Vanitamami) 'if your husband has a mistress or two, ignore it; take up a hobby instead — cats, maybe, or your sister's children') and so she thought she would advise me in her turn." (31)

Here Jaya's thinking is the result of her aunt, Vanitamami's endurance. Jaya had seen her tolerating her husband's every wrongdoing without any complaint just like a traditional Indian housewife and rejected her advice considering it just 'mau, mau' of a cat. But after a long gap now she was reminded of her pithy maxim and she thought, "Without the tree, you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable. This followed logically. And so you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lies." (32) She thinks about her relationship with Mohan and finds that now it is based on deceptions, lies and evasions. She is disillusioned and thinks how wrong Karl Marx was in saying, "The relation of man to woman is the most natural of one person to another." (132) She is reminded of her father's words, who

wanted to make her different from other girls who "asked for nothing more than the destiny of being wives and mothers." "You are not like the others, Jaya, ...You're going to be different from the others, Jaya." (136) But after her father's death she feels that she is out of this safe circle and her life is messed up.

She is reminded of her grandmother who had been very disapproving of sending the children to the English school yet her father sent them there. She thinks that in this way she had been ready for Mohan who had expressed his fascination for a convent educated, cultured wife who could speak good English. "You know, Jaya, the first day I met you at your Ramukaka's house, you were talking to your brother Dinkar, ...I think it was at that moment that I decided I would marry you." (90) He told her that once he had seen three women in a dingy corridor in a house – warming, and was impressed by the way they had dressed up and they spoke and wanted to have his wife like them. She feels that she did not know what kind of husband she wanted to have. "It had been our parents who had taken charge of these vague desires of ours and translated them into hard facts." (91) After Jaya's father's death her brother became the guardian of their family even in their mother's presence because he was the eldest male member of the family and so it was his responsibility to get Jaya married. When her brother tells her about Mohan she talks frankly, and wants to know about him in detail and at last decides to marry him. She thinks as a strong and powerful girl "I would marry Mohan. The decision would be mine." But later she realizes that it was not she who had decided to marry Mohan, but "the truth is that he had decided to marry me, I had only to acquiesce." (94) So as a girl she was unable to take decision

or choose her husband and accepted whatever was decided or chosen by her guardian. She thinks that her relationship with Mohan “has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have been snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel.” (7) She saw herself and Mohan as “two bullocks yoked together’ when she went with him after marriage.

Shashi Deshpande uses this imagery thrice in the novel to show the change of feelings in the relationship of Jaya and Mohan. When he decided to shift to Dadar flat to escape the scene of investigation, he had assumed she would accompany him, had taken for granted her acquiescence in his plans. And here she thinks of themselves, “Two bullocks yoked together... it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain.” (12) Later she realizes that though earlier she had cut off the bits of herself that had refused to be Mohan’s wife, now that kind of fragmentation is not possible and she rejects the image of “Two bullocks yoked together.” Earlier she had thought with a guilty conscience that rebirth gives us a chance to redeem the failures of this life; now she thinks, “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) And she had chosen silence, emptiness and vacuum for herself.

She feels a great change in Mohan’s behaviour due to loss of his job. She feels that without his routine, file, telephone, appointments he seemed to be no one at

all; certainly not that man, her husband, around whose needs and desires her own life revolved. “The truth was that we had both lost the props of our lives.... There was nothing he needed, so there was nothing for me to do, nothing I had to do. My own career as a wife was in jeopardy. The woman who had shopped and cooked, cleaned, organized and cared for her home and her family with such passion... where had she gone?” (25) She finds a change in herself too yet she has a curious sense of freedom after years of her routine life. Her children Rahul and Rati had gone on a trip to south with Jaya’s friend, Rupa’s family. When he goes out she thinks. “It was a relief to be alone. I’d always treasured my hours of solitude without Mohan and the children. Mohan’s constant presence, since we came here, had become a burden to me.” (68) She realizes that it was Mohan who knew what he wanted, the kind of life he wanted to lead, the kind of home he would live in and she followed him. She feels lost because her life revolved round his. Now she did not know what to do or what does she want, as if she had no choice of her own. Yet she knew that she felt comfortable here than her well-furnished home in Church gate. It was here that she really had a feeling of anger for Mohan when he said, “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.” (9) It shows his self-righteousness. He always considered himself to be right. He considered himself to be a dutiful son, father, husband and brother but till then Jaya had listened to him with a faint sense of bewilderment.

She recalls her past when she was pregnant for the second time and due to some complications went to the doctor, he misjudged her from her appearance, her

crumpled, soiled homewear sari. When Mohan knew it he became furious, perhaps he felt insulted. And after sometime he had managed to get his desired post in Bombay. Now Jaya thinks that she never asked him how he did it. She did so to be an ideal wife as she thinks, “If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly.” (61) She was satisfied with the knowledge that now she had enough to fulfil all their needs and to send to his parents. She was reminded of the mythical story of Yajnavalkya and Maitreyee, in which he offered her half of his property and she rejected it because it was unable to give her immortality. And Jaya considers it a crazy idea.

Noticing the change in Mohan’s behaviour, she is reminded how traditional he was in his thinking that he did not want to promote her writing career and never wanted her to work but now he asks her to take up a job. But now it was too late because she had ‘abjured’ everything — ‘Seeta’, her weekly column, her stories — everything. But she said nothing to Mohan — because she thought it simpler to say nothing and keep silent, it was less complicated than saying anything. When Mohan wants to take her advice whether he should go back to know what is happening, she is wordless. “I raked my brains trying to think of an answer.” (31) Mohan took it otherwise and accused her of not caring about the children and isolating herself from him and his concerns. He said that he had allowed her to have her way in most things and never came in her way when she wanted to help her family. He added that he let her do what she wanted... and she completed the sentence “...Except when it inconvenienced you. ...I’ve done

everything you wanted me to.” She thinks ...I’ve sacrificed my life for you and the children. But real bitterness clawed its way through this self-mockery, and I was conscious of having been chained to his dream, the dream that had begun for him when, as a boy, he had seen a gleaming vision of three women in a dingy corridor. It seemed to me that I’d carried those three women of his through all the years of our marriage.” (120) So, somehow, she was herself responsible for her own victimization.

Though she wanted to speak, to cry out, she could speak nothing. She is reminded of her grandmother who told her once that her husband would be uncomfortable with her because she had a question for everything and a retort for everything — she thinks that the situation is just the opposite, yet there is no comfort either. She felt a monstrously huge spear that went through her, excruciatingly painful, yet leaving her cruelly conscious. She finds a totally changed person instead of herself. Earlier she had found that she had changed into Suhasini from Jaya but now she feels that she is not Suhasini either. She feels that Suhasini was killed between Mohan and herself. But in dying, she had given her back the burden she had been carrying for her all these years after her marriage. And now she had finally to bear it herself, the burden of wifehood.

Though both of them proclaim that they know the other well enough, yet it is obvious that neither of them was able to know the other’s feelings. Mohan says to Jaya that she despises him because he has failed. He says, “I know you... After all these years together, don’t you think I know you well enough? ... Do you think I haven’t seen how changed you are since we came here, since I told you about my

situation?” Jaya thinks that she had also told him once, “I know you better than you know yourself. ...And I had meant it; wasn’t he my profession, my career, my means of livelihood? Not to know him was to admit that I had failed at my job. But why then did the idea of his anxiety not occur to me this time? Was I slipping, losing the clue to him? Or was it that, not caring, I was not as finely tuned to his moods as I had been?” (75) After sometime she realizes that she never said anything to him that might hurt him even when he asked, “...have I hurt you.” Because, “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) Though she was accused of not caring for him yet she thinks that she was unable to get rid of the habit of caring.

Actually Mohan was living in utter frustration and was full of negative thinking. It seems to Jaya that he was devoid of “...his old air of authority and confidence. Then the old self vanished, leaving behind a sad, bewildered man.” (8) He does not like Jaya to go even to meet her brother because he is afraid of being lonely. He himself sends her to Churchgate to check the mail and when she returns back she finds him waiting impatiently. He expresses his feelings as if realizing her importance in his hardships, “But I don’t like your going away, I don’t like being alone here, without you. I feel lost.” (85) Earlier he did not know what waiting was, it was she who had to wait for him and everything, it was she who felt loneliness without him. She supposes that it was hard for him to be alone and to wait. “But for women 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 until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married, I had nothing but ‘wait’. Waiting for Mohan to come home, ...” (30)

Shashi Deshpande has tried to prove through dreams how important Mohan had been for Jaya. In the dream, she had a vision that while walking with Mohan she is left behind. After sometime she feels lost when she finds herself alone without Mohan. She becomes aimless, not knowing where she is, where she has to go and how can she find him. She feels disoriented. And again, when he comes to her she feels quite well; her illness, helplessness quite gone. She thinks, “Love ...? Yes, what else could I call it but love ... when I thought of the agony it had been to be without him, when his desires, his approval, his love, had seemed to be the most important thing in my life?” (95) But now the situation was quite the contrary. The relation between Mohan and Jaya was not based on love and mutual need but they continued it due to social fear. “It was time, finally, and not any rationalization that took away the agony out of my feelings for Mohan. I’d begun to think that my need was now less; I could stay apart from him without a twinge....” (97)

Earlier she cared for him so much that the strength of her feelings for him had shamed and terrified her. Whenever he had been late in coming home, she shaped her life to a desolate widowhood in her imagination. Mohan’s status mattered a lot to her. She would not even think of doing anything that might harm his status. She cannot say anything even jokingly that might hurt his male ego. And as her character Jaya herself realizes in the novel that she could not laugh at Mohan even on

the same matter on which he had laughed at her. "I had known then that I could not afford to laugh at something that was for Mohan a very solemn affair. I had already realized it by then, that I could never laugh at Mohan, at anything that mattered to Mohan. If I did so, it diminished him; and who wanted a dwarfed husband? Certainly I didn't." (169) But when he accuses her of not caring for him she could not control herself, she could not hold her laughter. She started laughing hysterically in reply, and later realized what she had done, and decides to say sorry for her behaviour, "I'm sorry, I will say, 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...." But till then Mohan had gone leaving her alone. Like Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, here Jaya is also frightened of the darkness and loneliness. Jaya rationalizes, "...we're all frightened of the dark, frightened of being alone." (97) But it is different kind of fear. She had wanted to live with her family in a secure world. She had thought, "If it's dark outside what does it matter? I can close the door and windows, switch on the lights and the darkness will recede. But now I knew that I could never shut out the darkness; the darkness had invaded me." (182)

She is reminded of the story of crow and sparrow in which the foolish credulous crow standing out in the rain, begs to be let in, while the sister sparrow spins out her excuses. And at last when she let him in, she burnt him to death by making him sit on the pan on which she had just made the chapattis. She did not tell this story as a bed-time tale to her son Rahul because she thought it might have a bad impact on him as the victim in this story, the crow was a male and the victorious sparrow a female! She thought that it might be more deadly

for Rati because boys can forget this story but girls never will and she will become like that sparrow — good for her home, baby ... and to hell with the rest of the world. She feels that she can never be safe, "Stay at home, look after your babies, keep out the rest of the world, and you're safe. That poor idiotic woman Suhasini believed in this. I know better now. I know that safety is always unattainable. You're never safe. (17) Meanwhile she gets the message from her friend that Rahul was not with them. He had gone somewhere without informing them. So, with Mohan gone and Rahul missing, she undergoes acute mental agonies. Here she is reminded of her cousin Kusum, whom she had left alone and Kusum's cry, 'Don't go, Jaya, don't leave me here and go, stay with me?' (8) She thinks, "An act and retribution ... they followed each other naturally and inevitably.... Yes escape was never possible." (8)

She is reminded how she had resisted for the first time when Mohan had tried to stop her from helping Kusum. Her mother informs her about Kusum's death and writes that 'it was a good thing in a way' for 'she was of no use to anyone after she went crazy, nobody needed her? She thinks how she had felt herself superior when Kusum was alive. It was Kusum who made her realize who she was, she was not Kusum. But after her death Jaya realizes that it is not Kusum that is an object of sympathy but it is Jaya herself that is an object of sympathy because of her indecision to live or to die.

Earlier she had thought about Vanitamami that she did not know what it was to choose because she was not given the opportunity to choose anything. In a traditional family like hers, she was always dominated by her mother-in-law and after

her death by her sister-in-law. She thinks that the reason behind her poor choice in taking Kusum of all her sister's children was a mystery. Perhaps she had taken her because she found a kindred spirit in Kusum — both of them born failures, born losers. And now she finds Jaya and Kusum together... both of them rejected by their husbands, their families, failures at everything. "I found myself engulfed by the ghost of Kusum, welcoming me to the category of unwanted wives, deserted wives, claiming me joyfully at last as a companion." (125) The grief and pain she undergoes in this situation is unbearable to her when she is reminded of her father's words, "Bite on your pain, don't let it escape, don't let it cry out." (129) When Mukta, Jaya's neighbour, came to help and look-after her, she wanted her to go away. Because she did not want to lose her self – control and go mad like Kusum 'and clung to Mukta crying out... don't go, Mukta, don't leave me alone.' (181) In a state of utter frustration, she feels lost without Mohan and is unable to find her own identity. "All these 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 felt so superior to others... Kusum, yes, and you too... and now, without Mohan, I'm... I don't know, I don't know what I am." (185)

Like Sarita in **The Dark Holds No Terrors**, she is also in search of comfort. She thinks that she was given so many advices when she got married but no one advised what to do when a marriage was over. She feels restless, "A wave of sickness overcame me and I found myself longing for someone to come and comfort me. To tell me it was all right. To reassure me that I had done no wrong."

(139) Though she said nothing, she too had many grievances against him. She failed to express her anguish even in her writings. Once she had wanted to express her restlessness through laugh or anguished sobs but she could not do anything. She thinks, "Why had I done that? Why had I suppressed that desperate woman (herself)? ... We've like that, all of us, bound by fear. Yes, I have been scared, scared of breaking through that thin veneer of a happy family..." (191)

She is wise enough to analyze each and every situation of her life and therefore is unable to surrender completely like a traditional woman by taking it as her fate. She is not only aware of the troubles of her personal life but she also analyses the situation of the women of different class and kind of her society, and the gender-based bias in the behaviour of both male and female members of her society. Mohan himself had seen his mother's endurance and called it her strength near Jaya. It is an example of a traditional woman who was always busy in her household work and bore eleven children of whom five died in childhood. She herself died when she went to a midwife and tried to abort her last child. Her whole life was spent in cooking, cleaning, looking after her children and tolerating ill treatment of her husband.

Once Mohan's sister Vimala had told Jaya about their mother. She told her how she did not consider education essential for her daughters and stopped their schooling to look after younger brothers and sisters. She considered herself different from her mother. Yet Jaya observes that there was 'something in common between them, something that links the destinies of the two... the silence in which they died.' (39) She is reminded of Vimala's mother-in-

law who had shrugged heavily, when she and Mohan had visited her, and said, “God knows what’s wrong with her, she’s been lying there on her bed for over a month now. Yes, take her away if you want to. I never heard of women going to hospitals and doctors for such a thing. As if other women don’t have heavy periods! What a fuss! But these women who’ve never had children are like that.” (39) When they brought her to doctor, he said that it was too late for surgery. She sank into a coma and died silently a week later due to ovarian tumour with metastases in the lungs. Jaya’s servant Jeeja, a hardworking, lower class woman endured everything silently and there was no anger even behind her silence. She does not blame her husband for being a drunkard and beating her every now and then, or even for marrying again, nor does she blame that woman for marrying him. She accepts whatever she got from life saying, “With whom shall I be angry?” (52) Instead she sternly shuts up her step daughter-in-law who curses her husband saying, “...he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that?” So, she takes part of her step son who also follows the path shown by his father. She requests Jaya to save his life and says, “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) She says that his children will become orphans if he dies. While thinking about Jeeja she is reminded of “All those happy women with husbands in good jobs, men who didn’t drink and beat their wives...” (52)

Another sweeper woman Nayana curses men ‘as wasters, good-for-nothing, drunkards, still she craves for a male-child. When Jaya asks her why does she want a boy so much, she gives her explanation:

“Why give birth to a girl, behnji, who’ll only suffer because of men all her life. (28) She protests when her husband threatens her to throw her out if she bore another daughter, “Just you dare... Let me see your courage. Take yourself another woman if you want, roll in the gutters. I can’t prevent you, but just you try to throw me out of this house.” (28) It seems that she is conscious of her right in his property yet it cannot make her situation better. She had to suffer because she had no son. Jaya is reminded of an account of how baby girls were buried alive, crushed to death in the room they were born in, immediately after that a fire was lit on the spot — to purify the place. It had disturbed her when she read it but now she wondered ‘whether it wasn’t more merciful, that swift ending of the agony once and for all, than this prolonging of it for years and years.’ (53)

There are many other instances in the novel which show the importance conferred on the boys. Jaya’s neighbour Mukta is supposed to be consoled and comforted after her husband’s death that ‘the child who would be born; a son possibly, who would be both her solace and her support.’ (64) While thinking about her fasts and her widowhood she felt that “Her self-mortification seemed to be the most positive thing about her. And yet her piety — surely it was that which prompted those fasts? — seemed meaningless, since she had already forfeited the purpose of it, the purpose of all Hindu women’s fasts — the avoidance of widowhood.” (67) And the child she bore was a girl child — Nilima, who told Jaya about her grandmother’s anxiety “One son dead, the other running away, and not even a grandson; who’ll cremate us when we’re dead?” And it seems to be funny to Nilima to worry about who will cremate you.

Jaya becomes furious when her brother Ravi comments on Vanitamami's refusal for operation that she was holding on to her uterus hoping even then she would get a kid. "What did he know? What did he understand of women? Was it the Greeks who had said that a woman is her womb? I had laughed when I had read that. But can a woman deny the link? Those painful spasms in the middle of each cycle, those massive driving-on-to-madness contracting pains of childbirth — could any woman endure them if not for the fact that they were reminders of that link?" (107) Ravi tells her about the quarrel between him and his wife Asha. She knows it very well how her mother would react, if she knew about it, taking side of her son blindly that the girl was not good for him. For a traditional woman like her, son is always right and it is the daughter-in-law who is the embodiment of all evils, no matter even if she is of her own choice. Though Ravi wants Jaya to reconcile them yet he wants her to say things in his favour. Things like: "Go home like a good girl, Asha, ...and obey your husband. And never mind whatever it is he has done, he's your husband, after all, and a husband can do no wrong." (115)

Jaya observes the gender-based bias of her grandmother and mother, how her maternal grandmother gave all her jewels to her son (Chandumama) even when he had no children to possess them after him and in the same way her mother gives her flat of Bombay to her son, though he gives it to Jaya when he settles abroad. Jaya gets irritated when her mother's domination was questioned by her sister-in-law, and she showed her inclination towards Jaya as if her world centered round Jaya. Jaya thinks angrily that when she had passionately wanted her love, she had ignored her and paid more attention to her

sons. And now for all her three children she was a burden "She was now desperately looking out for a place she could retreat to; and her three children were looking at one another fearfully, wondering: *am I going to provide that refuge? Why can't it be you? Why does it have to be me?*" (104)

When her uncle, Ramukaka, shows her their family tree, she exclaims that she is not there. She feels not just 'inconsequential' but 'wholly blotted out' when he explains and tries to make her realize that being a girl she has no right to have a place even in her father's family tree. Then she thinks about other female members of her family and their right: "...if I don't belong to this family, what about the Kakis and Ai? They married into this family, didn't they, why are they not here? And what about ajji, who single-handedly kept the family together, why isn't she here?" (143)

Towards the end, she realizes that life is impossible for her without Mohan. She asks herself, "Was it impossible for me to relate to the world without Mohan?" (167) She feels that her life was complete only when she was with her husband and children. "If Mohan returns ...if only Rahul and Rati come back, we can begin living afresh..." (182) She consoles herself by thinking that Mohan must have gone to their Church gate home and would be waiting for her. She regrets why had not she thought that earlier. She is reminded how till then she had given Mohan the answer of his rhetorical question according to his wish and decides to do the same now so that 'authority will seep into Mohan once more.' (192) She decides with a hope to speak, to listen and to erase the silence between them because 'life has always to be made possible.' (193)

Notes and References:

1. King, Adele, "Effective Portrait", Debonair, June 1988. P-97.
2. Deshpande, Shashi, That Long Silence, (Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1989) pp-15-16. All further textual references are from this book, from this edition.
3. Mies, Maria, Indian Woman and Patriarchy (New Delhi: Concept, 1980). P-130.