

## **BREAKING THE SILENCE: A STUDY OF FAY WELDON'S *THE LIFE AND LOVES OF A SHE-DEVIL* AND SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *THAT LONG SILENCE***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Women have been adored as the goddess of sacrifice, care, creation and compassion by many writers. But in recent times the feminist movement has produced a more conscious depiction of the roles of women and presented through images or metaphors to voice their opinion. The present paper endeavours Ruth's and Jaya's realisation of the power hidden inside them. The power of self-discovery makes them the real Jaya and the real Ruth. Fay Weldon has presented a balanced-image of woman with proportionate quality of goodness and evil in her novel *The Life and Loves of She-Devil*. Ruth, the protagonist, breaks her silence when her husband Bobbo addressed her as a "*She-Devil*." Ruth is less feminine and is not presentable and because of that Bobbo leaves her and goes to his love interest Mary Fisher, a romantic novel writer. This desertion makes Ruth revengeful. After going through several extreme phases, she discovers her "*Self*". Contrarily, Jaya, the heroine of Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, strives for her identity and breaks her silence through writing. Both the lead voices of the two novels, face the desertion from their husbands but their perspective is quite different. Ruth adopts unfair means to take revenge from her husband whereas Jaya silently vents out her silence through writing and waits for her husband. Both the female voices unanimously present the fact that women should realise the hidden power in themselves to break the silence levied on them by the society. The paper attempts to study the different faces and phases of the two female characters- Ruth and Jaya and their evolution as a new woman.

**KEYWORDS:** That Long Silence, the Life and Loves of a She-Devil, the Beauty Myth

### **INTRODUCTION**

From the beginning of this world, woman has been considered as a subordinate one. Aristotle says that a female is female because she lacks certain qualities and her nature suffers from natural defectiveness. The Genesis story says that Eve appeared from Adam's 'supernumerary' bone that signifies her subdued position in respect to Adam. All the definitions and patriarchy-defined stories of origin, have always positioned and fixed woman in relation to man and not as a sovereign being. This being-less-ness in woman has led to the crisis of identity in her and when the realization of this comes to her, she raises her "self".

The condition of woman is same everywhere and is universal. Boundary never acts as a hindrance when the eudemonia of human being is concerned. It helps in exhibiting something beautiful and worthy despite its literal meaning of "separation". It is proved in case of Shashi Deshpande and Fay Weldon. Shashi Deshpande is a renowned author from India, written ten novels that majorly deal with the general condition of Indian middle class educated women. Similarly, Fay Weldon is a prominent English author with more than score novels. Both the writers have presented the predicament of woman in general and woman of the respective cultures in particular. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) and Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) plough the quandary of woman in the patriarchal society with her

suffering, loss of identity and her struggle for presence or existence. Both the novelists have presented the sojourn of their protagonists, Ruth and Jaya, to break the long silence that has made woman as a subordinate being, the *Other*.

Ruth and Jaya suffer silently due to patriarchal norms. Like every women they also have to accept the fate assigned to them by the patriarchy. They fulfill the assigned roles to them, that is, of a mother, wife and woman and in the anxiety to accomplish these roles, Ruth and Jaya, face crisis in all the spheres of their lives as a wife, as a mother and as an individual. This makes them realize of their non-existence in the society in general and family in particular. This realization provokes them to break the age old silence and to make them aware of the worth of their presence/ existence and to raise their "*Self*". The present paper will splice the two writers' smooth presentation of the general fact about the status of woman across the globe but with an extra-ordinary way of transgression.

There are certain parametric quantities through which this patriarchal society rules and governs the life of woman. Beauty is one of such parametric quality. It plays an important role in a woman's life in constructing and mildewing her, according to the need and demand of the patriarchal society. The gaze of patriarchy will define the womanliness of a woman. The beauty politics of the society decides her importance and rank as a woman. The concept of beauty lies in possessing a soft, fair-skinned, measured and toned body and if a woman lacks in these qualities, she is twice removed from the league of beautiful woman. Even woman's beauty is often dovetailed or associated to the fertility. Naomi Wolf, in her book *The Beauty Myth*, has presented the view that the success rate of reproduction is high if a woman is beautiful. To quote her:

The quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists.... Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless.

*(The Beauty Myth, 12)*

A beautiful body pleases the senses of the society and that results in the commercialization as well as idolization of a female body. If a woman fails to possess beautiful body, she has to suffer the ignorance and ill-treatment from the society. Ruth's beauty-less-ness develops silence and internality in her that leads to sense of recede and silence. Her struggle to accommodate herself in the society starts when she accepts that she does not belong to the league of beautiful women with her appearance. Her silent acceptance makes her to stay in the society un-namely. Her less feminine qualities make her lonely. She is aware of the fact that she is not a blessed one like her "soft- boned sisters". She finds that she has no place in this society as she neither belongs to the community of women nor in the patriarchy. She says:

I am six feet two inches tall, which is fine for a man but not for a woman. I am as dark as Mary Fisher is fair, and have one of those jutting jaws which tall, dark women often have, and eyes sunk rather far back into my face, and a hooked nose. My shoulders are broad and bony and my hips broad and fleshy, and muscles in my legs are well developed. My arms, I swear, are too short for my body. My nature and my looks do not agree. I was unlucky, you might think, in the great Lucky Dip that is woman's life.

*(The Life and Loves of A She- Devil, 11)*

This assertion of Ruth for her appearance shows a sense of rootlessness and seclusion that ultimately leads to inwardness and silence. Ruth is doubly defeated by her fate. She neither possesses beauty nor is accepted fully by the

society or by her family. Her mother used to call her “**an ugly duckling**” as she felt ashamed of Ruth due to her not-so-womanly look. Ruth says:

My mother was pretty enough, and ashamed of me. I could see it in her eyes. I was her eldest child. ‘The image of your father,’ she’d say.... ‘Little ugly duckling,’ my mother said to me once, almost weeping, smoothing my wiry hair. ‘What are we to do with you? What’s to become of you?’ I think perhaps she would have loved me, if she could. But ugly and discordant things revolted her: she couldn’t help it.

*(The Life and Loves of A She- Devil, 13)*

Ruth has suffered from a “less-ness”, that is, she never gets parental love, she never gets love from siblings, and she never gets love from society. Due to this lack, she is even unable to love herself and decides to leave her parental home, to test her luck. So, when handsome Bobbo agrees to marry her, she starts feeling secured-financially, emotionally and socially. The feeling of “own-ness” starts developing inside her. She gives birth to two children and now she is content of having a family of her own. Her marriage puts her silently into another parametric quality of society, that is, as a simpatico one in the institution of marriage.

The institution of marriage signifies the power and possession of man/ society/ patriarchy. The politics of body and womb starts with this institution that leads to submission, suffering, tolerance and ultimately manoeuvring towards silence, the sustained silence. Marriage puts a woman in the cobweb of relationships and when she passes through different strings of relations, she finds herself unnoticed and subjugated every time. It happens only in the case of woman whereas for a man, the situation never changes. He remains as the head of the society and rules the life of woman. This norm of patriarchy generally allots the gender roles to define and adopt for “**reasons of utility and security**”. Simone de Beauvoir presents the same view about marriage when she says that wedlock is imposed on woman by the society. She animadverts about marriage as:

The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage.... Marriage is reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institution. Thus we must continue this study by analyzing marriage.

*(The Second Sex, 451)*

Normally, in Indian society a girl of marriageable age has little say of choice to make regarding her life, rather, she adheres to traditional norms of marriage. Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence*, is not an exception in this respect. Despite her free thoughts, she silently accepts the dominions of the society. She gets married to Mohan and has two children. With marriage, she puts herself in the different slots- of a mother, a wife and a woman. Her relationship is “delicately balanced” and her helplessness as well as fear of collapsing the relation is very prominent when she says:

Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have even snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on an even keel.

*(That Long Silence, 7)*

Both Ruth and Jaya, have a very fair image of life after marriage. They always dreamt of a family of “kid with the endearing moustache of milk”, “the tender, smiling mother rubbing Vicks on her son’s chest”, “the younger mother feeding her baby with Farex”, “smiling parents and chocolates”. But their dreams of “perfect family” never come true. This illusion

or dream of having a “perfect family” develops loneliness in them, resulting muteness and unexpectedness and creating vacuum. Ruth and Jaya both silently accept the fact that “husband is like a sheltering tree”.

For Mohan and Bobbo, marriage is an “open marriage based on convenience alone”. Through marriage, both Jaya and Ruth are being gendered by abiding the “normativity” and performative aspect of the patriarchy that makes a woman to enter into a straight and heterosexual relationship of insubordination/ subordination, powerful/ powerless and centre/ centre-lessness. Beauvoir's famous claim that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” is true in this respect. Gendering is becoming. For the sake of keeping the family intact, Ruth and Jaya suppress their desires, happiness and expectations. They cloak silence and take the assigned fate of:

I must pretend to be happy when I am not; for everyone's sake.

I must make no adverse comment on the manner of my existence; for everyone's sake.

I must be grateful for the roof over my head and the food on my table, and spend my days showing it, by cleaning and cooking and jumping up and down from my chair; for everyone's sake.

I must make my husband's parents like me; and my parents like him; for everyone's sake.

I must consent to the principle that those who earn most outside the home deserve most inside the home; for everyone's sake.

I must build up my husband's sexual confidence, I must not express any sexual interest in other men, in private or in public; I must ignore his way of diminishing me, by publicly praising women younger, prettier and more successful than me, and sleeping with them in private, if he can; for everyone's sake.

I must render him moral support in all his undertakings, however immoral they may be, for the marriage's sake. I must pretend in all matters to be less than him.

I must love through wealth and poverty, through good times and bad, and not swerve in my loyalty to him, for everyone's sake.

*(The Life and Loves of A She- Devil, 29-30)*

Ruth and Jaya pretend to be happy, never question about their existence, never complain about their loneliness, they support their husbands in their good as well as bad times without giving a second thought, and they maintained the decorum that “those who earn most outside the home deserve most inside the home.” They never disclose their sexual desire to their husbands. Their loneliness in the bed makes them tolerant and their inwardness lead to silence. For Ruth, Bobbo's stay at home is a celebration time for her. Bobbo stays at home very less because he loves to spend his days and nights with his beautiful mistress Mary Fisher, a romantic novelist. Jaya also never complains to Mohan regarding her dissatisfaction at bed and about Mohan's mechanical and dutiful love-making:

.... His consciousness of me touched me like a caress. Later, when we got into bed, and the lights were off, there would be caresses. And kisses. And then lovemaking, a silent, wordless love- making.

God, how terrible it was to know a man so well. I could time it, almost to the second, the whole process of our lovemaking, from the first devious wooing to the moment he turned away from me, offering me his hunched back.

(*That Long Silence*, 85)

Ruth's and Jaya's desires are now silent; they are carrying forward that long silence, muteness. Their silent attitude has made an idol woman- silence and tolerance. They forget the fact they are also individuals- they are Jaya and Ruth. Mohan changes Jaya's name to Suhasini, "...a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman"; and Ruth has been called as a "She-Devil" by Bobbo:

I see you at last as you really are. You are a third-rate person. You are a bad mother, a worse wife and a dreadful cook. In fact I don't think you are a woman at all. I think that what you are is a she-devil!

(*The Life and Loves of A She- Devil*, 47)

Both the women lose their identity. Their love, affection, dutifulness and womanliness remain unpaid and unnoticed by their husband. Despite of sacrifice and responsibility, Mohan deserts Jaya and Bobbo deserts Ruth.

Mohan holds Jaya responsible for his misfortune and says that whatever illegal practice he had adopted was just because of her and children. In the same way, Bobbo shows his lovelessness to Ruth and leaves her with their children to survive all alone and holds her responsible for making his life full of chaotic:

'See how I have to live!' he shouted. 'It's always like this. My wife creates havoc and destruction all round: she destroys everyone's happiness!'

(*The Life and Loves of A She- Devil*, 45)

This makes Ruth and Jaya realize their worth in the family as well as in society. They find that despite adopting and accepting the patriarchal norms, they have gained nothing. They realize how centered they are in their "centre-less place".

They find that they are fixated and ensnared in their own body, "pinned to one particular spot". Jaya's quality of being a good writer has been discarded by Mohan as he finds her writing only an exhibition where their private life is being publicized: "To Mohan, I had been no writer, only an exhibitionist".(*That Long Silence*, 144)

Ruth and Jaya's existence is being questioned by the society by ignoring their presence. The rejections from their husband bruise them internally. Ruth starts humming the new name given to her by Bobbo-"She-Devil". She now "sings the hymn to the death of love". Jaya starts introspecting.

The identity of Jaya is subsumed under Mohan's Suhasini. Her struggle to fit herself in the category of good housewife has cloaked her anger. To satisfy Mohan's ego and expectations, Jaya forcefully curbs her creative genius till she meets with Kamat. Kamat makes her feel that she is Jaya, a separate individual who has her own world, identity, desire and dreams.

But Jaya had already learnt the art of living a woman's life that consists of "no questions, no retorts. Only silence". When Kamat questions her why her writings do not depict/ present her anger, then Jaya answers that anger is not meant for woman as no one has ever heard of an "angry young woman". She says:

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...

*(That Long Silence, 147-148)*

Kamat's strong influence on Jaya brings a transformation in her. Her womanhood is rewarded now when she is with Kamat. She feels and starts reviving "Jaya" into her.

At certain point of time, Jaya starts feeling softness for Kamat. But according to the societal norm, polygamy is not meant for woman and specially in India where it is believed that once a girl is married to a man and takes seven rounds to an auspicious fire, that man only becomes her husband for the coming seven incarnations of her. Jaya is not an exception.

She pulls herself back and focuses her and Mohan's relation. She finds that her natural relation with Mohan is only of "treachery, deceit and betrayal". She wants to break her silence living within the confinements. She finds that rejuvenating hibernated Jaya is a must to speak what Jaya really wants. She decides to speak through her writing.

So when Mohan writes her that he is coming back, Jaya decides not to be Suhasini again to win Mohan, she decides to be Jaya by breaking the silence between her and Mohan. Jaya remains silent to break her silence by using silence as a weapon to assert herself. She says that to achieve anything and to become anyone, one has to become ruthless and hard:

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.... 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.

*(That Long Silence, 192-193)*

Ruth also breaks her silence when Bobbo calls her "She-Devil". But Ruth does not remain silent to revive her lost "self". When Bobbo leaves her and moves to Mary Fisher's house, Ruth decides to be the she-devil. She takes her children with her and leaves them with Mary Fisher and Bobbo. She rejects her motherhood, wife-hood and the she-ness in her. From Ruth she becomes Ruth-less. She says:

I want revenge.

I want power.

I want money.

I want to be loved and not love in return.

I want to give hate its head. I want hate to drive out love, and I want to follow hate where it leads: and then, when I have done what I want with it, and not a minute before, I will master it.

*(The Life and Loves of a She-Devil, 49)*

She wants everything that the patriarchy has taken away from her by measuring her into his parametric quality and not as an individual being. She decides to give a hard blow to Bobbo and Mary Fisher, whom she considers as a dummy of patriarchal parameter:

I look at my face in the bathroom mirror. I want to see something different.

I take off my clothes. I stand naked. I look. I want to be changed.

Nothing is impossible, not for she devils.

Peel away the wife, the mother, find the woman, and there the she devil is.

Excellent!

Glitter- glitter. Are those my eyes? They're so bright they light up the room.

(*The Life and Loves of a She- Devil*, 50)

Ruth wants to break the traditional role assigned to a woman. She now wants her wounded "self" to mend. She wants to take revenge on Bobbo. She establishes a company called Vista Rose where she appointed and trained many needy women. She helps them to sharpen their skills of household works and place them to homes and offices. She places a lady in Bobbo's office to transfer his official money to her secret account. This is done without the notice of Bobbo and Mary Fisher. The auditors find a big cozenage in the account and arrest him for the fraud. Ruth takes all the money and goes for a plastic surgery and takes other medical aids to make herself the replica of beautiful Mary Fisher. In this long process of taking revenge, Ruth gets into relationship with many men to satisfy her sexual ego. She wants to make herself outwardly beautiful as the patriarchy has forced her to do so:

But there is no beauty in my soul, not now, and I have no place, so I must make my own, and since I cannot change the world, I will change myself.

I am invigorated. Self-knowledge and reason run through my veins: the cold slow blood of the she devil.

(*The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, 62)

The she-ness and devilish activity of Ruth is a tussle of being-ness and becoming-ness. She never did bloodshed but her activity weakened the strings of existence. Ruth is happy that she is a woman who can be a devil at the same time. She is a devil for the society and is the "she" for all women.

## CONCLUSIONS

Jaya and Ruth become women when they enter into this heterosexual relationship. Their dreams of a "perfect family" and hopes for "now they lived happily" kind of Cinderella story come to an end when they face the harsh reality of the life. Society plays a vital role in the respect of being a woman and becoming a woman. The performative aspect (societal norms) leads to the materialization of body that further leads to the commercialization of body, and ultimately establishes the patricentric hegemony by suppressing woman. Both Ruth and Jaya are in dis-ease due to the patriarchal norm and suffer from the disease of silence. To overcome this dis-ease and disease both the women adopt their own way to break the hegemonic code. Jaya uses silence as her weapon and Ruth becomes a 'She-Devil' to break herself free by snatching everything of the **so-called Essentialities** of the society.

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