

Article

Decolonising the Mind: Cultural Conflicts in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract: The discourse on decolonisation has primarily centred on land and territorial struggles, often reducing the concept to a political or geographical framework. As a result, the profound and pervasive dimension of mental colonisation is frequently overlooked. Unlike physical colonisation, which may be reversed through political independence, colonisation of the mind is more insidious and enduring, as it infiltrates the very structures of thought, identity, and self-perception. Cultural hybridity, patriarchal dominance, dysfunctional familial structures, and ingrained social hierarchies all serve as mechanisms through which the mind is subjected to control and regulation. From an early age, individuals are subtly colonised within the domestic sphere—through language, cultural practices, behavioural expectations, and hierarchical norms imposed as superior values. This paper explores the psychological dimensions of such internalised colonisation in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, situating the analysis within the framework of trauma theory. The central focus is on Jaya, the protagonist, whose subjectivity is fractured by the conflicting cultural imperatives of her natal home and her marital household. Her struggle illuminates how the colonised mind negotiates trauma within the intersecting domains of gender, family, and culture.

Keywords: Mental colonisation; trauma; cultural hybridity; identity

Introduction

Humans do not enjoy absolute control over themselves. Though a person aims to rule his or her life, it becomes impossible to attain it. In some way or another, mutual dependence creeps in. Mutual dependence and mutual reliability are best if they remain mutual. However, the patriarchal society had demolished nature's gift of living this way. Often, it is only men who take their position as consumers, and women are relegated to the role of producers. The increasing demands of production, combined with limited consumption, drain women both mentally and physically. In some instances, it finds its place as an unending trauma that makes their life difficult to live.

That Long Silence (1988), which is the subject of this study, won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1990 and the Padma Shri Award in 2009. *The Long Silence* talks about the marital discord between Jaya and Mohan. It beautifully brings out the role of Jaya as a woman in a dogmatic social milieu and society. Most novels do not talk about trauma within households. This masterpiece brings out the mental condition of Jaya, imposed by colonising her mind with traditional roles that she is expected to play as a woman.

Colonisation of Mind

Trapped between tradition and modernity, Jaya suffered mental trauma. Men and the patriarchal system define women's conduct, behaviour, and existence. For Jaya, the instructions came right within the households. From her childhood, Jaya had been indoctrinated to confine herself to the ways of traditional womanhood. *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 of the world.* (Deshpande 8) Jaya's parents were very supportive of her in all aspects of her childhood. They made her study, gave her a standard education, and provided everything that would enable her to become an independent woman with modern values. They wanted her to choose her own life. However, when it came to choosing her life partner, she was never given a choice. Even if she was asked, the answer expected out of her mouth was the same as what they wanted. If she disagreed, she was considered an ill-mannered woman or a woman with pride and attitude. They had given her a good education, not because she could stand on her own, but because they wanted her to get married to a well-established groom.

Jaya's paternal uncle, Ramukaka, shows a family tree where only the men's names are listed. This greatly affected Jaya. For a woman who wanted to be free and liberated, living in a family like this was a significant injury to her mental health. She was discriminated against based on her gender within her familial boundaries. This is not exclusive to Jaya alone. Most women, after their marriage, are expected to wait for their husbands to finish their food, irrespective of how late they return home. Some say that this is out of love. However, truly it is not. Their mind is conditioned to submission in the name of love. The general idea that is prevalent in society is that men are strict and dominant to their wives because they love them more and they are possessive to protect their wives, which is absolutely wrong. These are some of the many ways to colonise a woman's mind, to make her "civilised". At Jaya's marriage, her name was

changed to 'Suhasini' to make Mohan, her husband, happy. The name Jaya means victory. This Sanskrit word is the epithet of the goddess Saraswati, the goddess of education and knowledge, as per Hindu mythology. The name was very significant to Jaya since it had given her a hopeful future filled with success, knowledge, and a scholarly outlook on life.

Education empowers a woman and opens her eyes to the flaws of society. However, society is not ready to see a woman as someone who is victorious in her career and life. Hence the change of name. The problematic factor here was her new name. She was not given a better name, but instead was given the name of a woman known for her sincere obedience to her husband. The meaning of the name 'Suhasini' is ever smiling. This was expected of Jaya by her family and society. She had to smile and keep her husband happy, no matter what happened to her. In addition to this, it is vital to notice that Jaya was not even given a chance to name herself, considering the change of name. All her life, she had been called by the name "Jaya". The name that was read during her school attendance, the name that her friends fondly called, the name she had written over a thousand times, the name she had heard repeatedly over and over again, was gone. Someone was deciding how she should be called, and Jaya could not say no to this. Mohan always spoke to her with the fullest authority over her so that she could not deny anything he said. Moreover, Jaya's mind believed it to be the epitome of the behaviour of a genuine housewife. After marriage, women are confined to familial roles such as wife, sister-in-law, sister, and daughter, and their free communication with the outside world is restricted. Jaya stopped talking to Kamat, who was her neighbour and a good friend of hers. Moreover, Jaya was more comfortable sharing her opinions with Kamat than with her husband. Kamat made her realise her fears and awakened anger within her. Kamat replaced the emptiness in Jaya's heart. Jaya found relief and liberation in Kamat. However, fearing what society would think of her talking to a man outside her marriage, she started to ignore his presence. Even at his death, she did not speak but remained silent. Imagine the amount of pressure Jaya had within herself in establishing herself as a faithful wife, a faithful friend, and being true to herself. The silence imposed upon her silenced her liveliness. Jaya's second home, which was Mohan's house, had a dysfunctional family. Mohan's father was a drunkard, and he beat his wife. It was not only Jaya but also Jaya's mother-in-law who experienced male domination after marriage. Mohan's father was an egoist, and under his leadership, Mohan's mother suffered greatly. He demanded certain things to be done to him without any excuses, failing which, his anger hit its peak without any control. For instance, his wife had to wait for him late at night till he returned home. She had to feed their children and then serve him freshly cooked food. He always wanted food that was untouched and hot from the pot. If not, he would throw his plate away and leave without eating. Mohan had grown up seeing this at his home. He had always seen his mother standing silently, hearing all the taunting words from his father. He began to adapt to the family's way of functioning. That was why Mohan could not tolerate Jaya speaking against him. People used emotions like anger as a threat and the best chance to colonise one's mind. Moreover, it is contagious. This act of colonising women's minds passes from generation to generation, cherished closely as part of the male

tradition. To Mohan, Jaya was a means to satisfy his desires and relieve the stress of his office work. Before Jaya's marriage, she lived a happy and carefree life. However, later, when her life became stuck in a monotonous routine of familial responsibilities, there was no space for Jaya's individuality. The repetitive routines and unending monotony pushed her into despondency, leaving her with zero motivation. This is one of the most widespread emotional issues affecting homemakers worldwide, although there are exceptions. The continual routines of daily household chores were one of the major causes of her trauma. It gave her a feeling that life is meaningless and that there is nothing on earth for which she has a purpose to live. This feeling of absurdity and meaningless routines is best explained through the myth of Sisyphus.

This Greek myth about Sisyphus tells the story of a man who was condemned to roll a rock to the top of a mountain, only to see it roll down again. Though he knew that what he had been doing was in vain, he had no other option but to repeat. This eternity of futile mundane labour is a hideous punishment. Similarly, homemakers in every home know that the daily household chores do no good to them except to sustain their lives. They cannot stop this routine, because society has no substitute for homemakers. Whether they are sick or weak, always a woman who has to help others in sustaining their lives. This position makes the task of colonising their minds easier. Of all women, homemakers are more vulnerable to being conditioned by men. The period of waiting is attached exclusively to women in society. Right from her childhood, Jaya was led into the gates of waiting. When they opened the gate, she entered. She could not decide on the timing for fulfilling her dreams. Mohan was the authoritative power over her. He decided what he wanted and what others should call her. In Indian houses, girl children are often deceived by this waiting period. This prolonged waiting in their lives makes them hopeless and turns their ability into futile, mundane labour, making their mind indolent to think and question. Often, a woman's life is defined and redefined by others. Outside the house, Mohan was found to be involved in financial malpractice, and therefore, Jaya was forced to go into hiding along with her husband. She was expected to take responsibility for the mistakes of her husband. Silence and surrender were the only weapons Jaya had to withstand this battle.

Jaya was never given a space to exhibit her anger. She had not expressed her agitation and disappointment in her marital relationship. Sorry, she was never allowed to. She had only suffered neurosis, hysteria, and frustrations. She was given a particular order and routine as her sole duty as a housewife, and she ought not to deviate from it. This monotonous and conditioned life was a mental torture to her. People believe that marriage is the solution to the issues women face in life. However, rather, it is the beginning of problems. It is where people from different cultures come together to colonise one over the other. Jaya, who had previously considered herself an independent woman with her own identity, was trying to conform to the traditional role of a housewife, as dictated by her family's lectures. She continued to change herself, including her physical appearance, according to Mohan's preferences. Jaya got her haircut and started wearing dark glasses to fit Mohan's tastes. In this way, she lost her identity, uniqueness, and value. Her self-worth got annihilated as she kept her husband satisfied with his interests. After her husband left for his workplace and her children

were sent to tour with family friends, she was pushed into isolation, where she contemplated her life. Most of the time, she pondered on what she wanted to become and what she had become. She became helpless with her present life and clueless about her future. The disruption in her routine during this period of hide and seek helped her find her true self. She took time to understand that she had gone far away from her dreams and passions, and it was high time for her to regain her strength to pursue her dreams. In Jaya's marriage, her desire was never taken seriously. She suppressed her long-term desire to become a writer for almost seventeen years due to societal constraints. Her marital expectations had turned her into a "responsible wife" rather than a capable writer. Jaya's innate talent for becoming a writer bloomed one day, and she started writing and pursuing her dreams. Once, Jaya wrote a story about a man who could not reach out to his wife except through physical relationship, which instilled anger in Mohan. At first, he thought that the man was himself. He could not accept that his wife was sharing their personal experiences through writing. Fearing her husband, Jaya stopped writing. Mohan jeopardised her writing career before she could shine in that field. From then, she began to write less humorous pieces on the travails of housewives, especially of the middle class, in the column titled 'Seeta'. The name of the column is very significant. Sita, a character in Hindu mythology, was the wife of Rama. Often, wives insist on living a life like Sita to their 'Rama', which is, again, a colonisation of the mind. Though they are praised for their romantic fascination, it is important not to leave out the fact that Sita had taken up Agnee Pareeksha, i.e., trial by fire, to prove her chastity and loyalty to her husband. Most of the wives in a middle-class family are put to the test to test their faith and obedience to their husbands.

Conclusion

Jaya was a strong woman. Though life had challenged her strength, her ideologies, and her passion, she had succeeded in being true to her passion and ideologies. She found that the real meaning of life lies in following her dreams and passions, rather than fulfilling the desires of others. Creating an impact on others' lives is necessary, but doing so at the cost of your passion causes much trauma. Jaya needed time to introspect and react to her situations. Within this unhealthy environment, talented women like Jaya found no place to shine. Jaya had given her best efforts to keep her dreams within the vicinity. All these years, silence was imposed on her to maintain the family's equilibrium, which she decided to break after a thorough examination and self-criticism of her life. She chose to give voice to her long-term silence. Jaya's silence stands as a universal cry of many women who are colonised by imposed silences. Women who are trapped in marriages like this can succeed only if they break their choking silence. We do not change overnight. It is possible that we may not change over long periods of time. However, we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible.

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