

**THE DARK ROOM OF SILENCE : THE EMERGING WOMAN IN R. K
NARAYAN'S THE DARK ROOM AND SHASHIDESH PANDE'S THAT
LONG SILENCE**

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Abstract

The article has its focus on the feminist issues discernible in R K Narayan's *The Dark Room* and ShashiDeshpande's *That Long Silence* which portray the indignities endured by the female protagonists. Though Savitri, Narayan's heroine, articulates her distress most powerfully, her efforts in this direction fail to evoke a favourable response from her husband. But Jaya in Deshpande's novel breaks her long silence and the way she does it brings about a drastic change in her husband's approach. This novel ends on a note of optimism whereas *The Dark Room* has an undercurrent of sadness.

The woman has always been relegated to the background and many writers in India have voiced the agonies and dilemmas of women in their writings, right from the days Indian writing in English has emerged as a branch of English literature, giving rise to a new area of study and research - Women's Studies. Women have been oppressed, victimized and marginalized, and their rightful place in family and society has been denied or unrecognized. Many writers have tried to raise this issue and to awaken our conscience with a view to bettering the lot of the wronged women. This article focuses on two novels – *The Dark Room* by R.K. Narayan and *That Long Silence* by ShashiDeshpande, where the issue is highlighted by showing how the female protagonists struggle against the injustices and indignities suffered by them in a patriarchal society.

One of the interesting characteristics of Narayan's writings is that it is completely free from propaganda. This endows his works with a transcending quality. He is what one might call a novelist pure and simple with no axe to grind. He can present the lower, middle or upper classes and their lives with a peculiar grace; he can describe their feelings, their perceptions, their crises, their experiences and behaviour within the scope of a particular situation. But he never takes any sides and the readers are left to themselves, to form their own conclusions. He says, "I don't try to impose my beliefs on anybody. I appreciate a free mind and would like to be left alone in peace to write what I please." (The Illustrated Weekly of India, June 23, 1963 P.43). Of course, Narayan is fully aware of the swelling waves of feminism sweeping through the western world and how its reverberations have transformed the Indian woman. His novels

unveil the mindscape of Indian women, in all its complexities. He portrays the sufferings and oppressions encountered by women in the domestic and social spheres with realism, evoking our sympathy for the victims. He also presents how women like Savitri, Bharathi and Rosie try to rebel against oppression and establish their identity. Yet, it would be wrong to brand him as a feminist. In answer to a question by Antony Spaeth who interviews the novelist for Time Magazine, Narayan says frankly, "I hate the word (feminism). I dislike all labels. For me, people come first." (DriesenVandenCynthai 123). One may, therefore, presume that the feminist issues reflected in his works are unintentional, on the part of the writer.

The feministic approach discernible in Narayan's works has its beginning in *The Dark Room* published in 1938. It is a social novel which has for its theme, the life in a house where the tyrannical actions of a bullying husband cause his passive wife, frequent heartaches and misery. The plot is simple as ever; the story being built round the central character; except for an escapade of his wife, and her subsequent disillusionment. Ramani, the local manager of the English Insurance Company, the most outstanding character in the novel, is pictured as a dominating personality who takes a sadist delight in perpetually bullying and nose-leading his wife. Savitri, the passive wife to whom her children and husband are everything in life bears with remarkable fortitude the indignities inflicted upon her. There are times when she dimly resents her husband's whims and fancies, but her protestations are merely a cry in the wilderness. Her self-control and womanly patience suffer a severe setback when she learns that her husband has been flirting with a typical daughter of Eve, a ShanthaBai, a woman probationer in Ramani's office. Savitri who feels fully convinced that her husband neglects her totally runs away from home; as if to teach him a lesson and give him sufficient room for repentance. She realizes how miserable her status at home is and ponders over her state. "How impotent she was, she thought she had not the slightest power to do anything at home; and that after fifteen years of her married life, she felt. She ought to have asserted herself a little more at the beginning of her married life and then all would have been well." (TDR 35)

She spends a few weeks as a servant to a quixotic, superstitious priest and longs for the presence of her children. Her disappearance fails to work a change in her husband and Savitri returns to her home and is greatly relieved to see that her husband does not reproach her. Savitri represents the women who suffer from the highhandedness of their imperious husbands. But later she undergoes a metamorphosis – from a submissive heroine she grows in stature to that of a rebellious woman who protests against male dominance and tyranny. At one stage she asks her husband, "Do you think that now I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here and eat food you buy with your money? No, I'll starve and die in the open, under the sky, a roof for which, 'we' need be obliged to no man." (TDR 87-88). At the same time her motherly instincts come to the fore and her rebellious spirit recedes to the back, and she resumes her former routine of life. The novel centres round her bold efforts to assert her real identity, as wife and mother. She is fully alive to her rights as a woman, and her role in the family is no longer just that of a self-pitying wife. She realizes that self-actualization is possible only through self-assertion. Her bitter words to Ramani when he asks her to quit the house taking whatever things she has, amply reveal her rebellious temper. "Things? I don't possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own?"

except her body? Everything else that she has her father's, her husband's or her sons' ...even the children are absolutely yours – you are right, didn't I say that a woman owns

nothing?(TDR 88). Out of a sense of mounting frustration she warns her husband: “Don’t think you can fondle us when you like and kick us when you choose” (TDR 85)

Narayan’s choice of the title for this novel is significant. In a sense, ‘dark room’ is a symbol of protest and it is a welcome retreat to the downhearted women folk to register protest against their husbands’ objectionable behaviour. One wonders whether there are such dark rooms in several traditional Indian houses. The fact that there is a dark room in Savitri’s house into which the slave like wife recedes, suggests to the novelist the title of the novel. Savitri’s life itself is dark and her anxious attempts at receiving the faintest illuminating ray from her overbearing husband make her life darker and more miserable. Standing between the pulls of two worlds, one empowering her to revolt against a tyrannical husband, and the other pulling her to helpless, dependent motherhood, she feels defeated at the end and her rebellious spirit dies. Her pessimistic confession at the end is thought-provoking. “I am like a bamboo pole which cannot stand without a wall to support it” (TDR 146). Though Savitri loses the battle, hers is a heroic attempt to assert her independence and legitimate rights, and she begins the fight, and deserves credit for it. Submission is not what she wills; she chooses only the lesser evil. Hers may be a defeat on the domestic plane, but it is a great spiritual victory. P.S. Sundaram truly remarks, “It is neither a tragedy nor a comedy but a thing that takes place in every society where the double standards are still valid and the women are economically so helpless that they just have to lump what they do not like.” (Prasad Nath Amar 95)

As an observer of the life around, Narayan is keenly aware of the changes coming from outside which have their impact on the domestic front, but he was averse to such changes occurring within the framework of orthodox, middle class families. Savitri, therefore, has to reconcile herself to the unchanging domestic reality, prevailing in Indian society.

That Long Silence by ShashiDeshpande, written fifty years after *The Dark Room* was published, has won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1990. It vividly portrays the sense of hollowness that haunts a middle class housewife who is trapped in a kind of self-created, self-imposed silence. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel realizes her real power as a woman only after being put to silent sufferings for a pretty long period of seventeen years. Her silence has enormous potential as an effective means of revolt against the oppressive aspects of patriarchy. Jaya tries to re-shape her broken identities, assert her will and articulate her distress. All through her life, she has played several roles-daughters, wife and mother and finally she is able to find an answer to the question that has tormented her for long, “who am I?” The novel ends up with her strong resolve to speak, thereby putting an end to the long-drawn silence that has engulfed her being.

Mohan, Jaya’s husband, is a man of imperious manners and he is insensitive to the hardship and mental torture to which he subjects his wife. A conformist and sexist to the very core, he seems to feel that his “wife is merely a robot of flesh and flavor supposed to be ever at his service as he offers her security and shelter.” (Kumar Gajendra 119). In this respect, Mohan and Ramani are kindred spirits; they seem to have the same tastes and same opinions about what they expect of their wives to be. The silence with which Savitri brooks the indignities that her husband heaps on her and that long embarrassed silence with which Jaya deliberately surrounds herself have something in common. In fact communication between Jaya and Mohan, either emotional or verbal, happens only at rare moments. Mohan wants his wife to be a cultured and well educated lady, not a reciprocating and loving one. The result is a disheartening silence that

develops between the husband and wife, and Jaya is at a loss to find even a word in response to Mohan's queries. It is this stifling domestic ambience that contributes, to a great extent, to Jaya's long self-induced silence.

The novel focusses on the marital life of Jaya, who finds her normal life disrupted, as a result of her attempt to fit herself into the role of a docile, uncomplaining, ideal wife in a patriarchal set up. She finds herself constrained to relegate to the background, her personal and emotional needs. This is perhaps what every woman has to do in exchange for safety, security and shelter. In the early days of her married life, Jaya is a caring wife who is very much concerned about her husband. But the monotony of being in a state of slave-like existence gradually descends on her. She says, "I had to admit the truth to myself that I had often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony" (TLS 4). It is this inner conflict in the heroine's mind that leads her to her soul-searching, self-seeking tendency.

The physical exploitation taking place in a loveless marriage is what Deshpande highlights in her novels. Jaya faces physical assaults at the hands of her husband, when he suspects at a stage that his wife is incapable of conception. Infertility is a curse in a patriarchal society, as it is believed that a woman becomes full-fledged only when she becomes a mother. It is also considered to be a sin for a woman to be the mother of a female child. To beget a male child is what Jaya longs for, in order to be able to enjoy the socio-cultural status accorded in a male-centric society. The anxiety and tension that Jaya undergoes cripples her mentally and emotionally. Jasbir Jain truly points out, "Deshpande opens out many such experiences in order to demonstrate both the centrality of marriage with its inbuilt clamouring for a male heir and its exploitativeness. Women cease to be angry; they give in to passive acceptance, and continue to pray for the 'kumkum' on their forehead (Piciuccio Paolo Pier 216).

The entire life of a woman right from her childhood is at the mercy of men - father, son and husband; but the husband is the most dominating male figure, for whose sake her whole life is geared up by compromising all her pride, self-respect and identity. The various women that Jaya comes across instruct her to suit herself to the whims and fancies of her husband. She observes the lives of the women around and their success in life is due to the fact that they all abide by the wishes of their husbands and Jaya too has to mould herself accordingly. Sidelining her personal priorities she lives like an ideal wife, without being completely able to delude herself into the plight of a mere stereotyped model of housewife. In this context, the beautiful image which Shashi Deshpande uses to describe Jaya's married life is worth remembering: "A pair of bullocks yoked together ... a couple with two children But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man and a woman." (TLS 8).

Jaya breaks her silence by taking to the vocation of a writer, and gives vent to her suppressed emotions by writing stories. Most of the stories that she writes are in relation to her own life. Mohan is afraid that her stories may expose his bitterness and inhumanity to the outside world. Writing is to her just an outlet to her oppressed self. She resolves to resume her literary pursuits and refuses to look up to Mohan for an answer he wants. Jaya says, "I have looked at his face for clues and then given him the answer. I know he wants But it is no longer possible for me. 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." (TLS 192)

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Compared to the other novels of ShashiDeshpande, *That LongSilence* is essentially a woman's novel and it presents in minute details the dreams, hopes and frustrations confronting the Jaya – Mohan relationship. It is noteworthy for the positive note on which it ends; Mohan succeeds in sorting out his affairs, her son who is lost temporarily is back home, and Jaya is no longer her depressed self and there is hope for a new beginning. Jaya is free to dream and her oppressing silence has vanished.

The Dark Room ends on a pessimistic note; Savitri's struggles to be self-sufficient suffer a setback, and she has to return to her former life of drudgery. Jaya, on the other hand, is hopeful of a better life to come. Mohan too, has a fear of being exposed, through his wife's writings. Ramani does not have any such fear. He continues as imperious as ever. While *The Dark Room* centres round the futile efforts of a middle class housewife to be self-reliant, *That Long Silence* has, as its focal point, the trials and tribulations of a wife which give her a new lease of life.

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