

**In quest of identity and the self:
Feminism, Self-Discovery and Development in Shashi Deshpande's *that Long Silence* and Margaret Atwood's *the Hand Maid's Tale***

Nayana Ashok¹, Sonia Chellirian²

¹MPhil Scholar ,Department of English Language and Literature Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham India. nayanayanam2797@gmail.com

²Assistance Professor, Department of English Language and Literature Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham India. sonia@asas.kh.amrita.edu

Abstract: For a long time, the female bodies were treated as victims under the male chauvinistic social set-ups. They were viewed as weaker and more vulnerable self and viewed as a damsel in distress. They were treated like pawns in the hands of men. The current study intends to investigate the sprouting identification of the self and self-discovery of the female leads in the two novels, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. The paper interprets how the authors portray the journey of the self through several trials and torments and how at last the female leads break their long silence resulting in their liberation. The female leads face a lot of uncertainty, distrust, violence, oppression of the self, and silence towards patriarchy and finally rise as a "New Woman". The two novels are written in reply to breaking the long silence that confines women. The two writers discuss the harsh social circumstances and customs that prevent the self-development and progress of women.

Key words: victim, patriarchy, self- consciousness, new-woman, self-development

INTRODUCTION

Feminism usually deals with problems of gender prejudice and covers all of the women in the world despite race, color, state, background, etc. For ages, the experience of the human has been considered equivalent to the male practice. Gyno criticism put forwarded new views of research and investigation. The feminist theory depicts the struggles of "self". The search for identity is a common theme of feminist writing and the fundamental responsibility of feminist literary criticism. Women and their struggles have always been the topic of analysis and the setting of many writings. Numerous writers have depicted the worries and trials of women in their works. The women were oppressed, deceived, and marginalized, and their place in family and society was rejected or refused by the male chauvinistic society. The writers raise this point and portray how humanity could better the conditions of women. This particular article focuses on two novels – *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. The current study estimates and reveals that how the female protagonists fight against injustice and oppression in a patriarchal society.

That long Silence written by Shashi Deshpande becomes an eye-opener for the social formation of the status of the females and their problems in Indian Society. Deshpande represents the miseries of the ordinary Indian women by the character Jaya in *That Long silence. The handmaid's tale* is placed in the backdrop of a hypothetical dystopian society and it presents the journey of the female lead Offred towards an in-depth perception of herself. *That long silence* by Shashi Deshpande and *The handmaid's tale* by Margaret Atwood is set in two complicated settings, cultural background, and personalities. At the same time, the two novels depict the quest for their individuality and awareness of the self. Both Jaya and Offred were the victims of the male chauvinistic society and morality. Jaya was a victim of cultural restriction while Offred was a victim of a totalitarian state. Both the characters reveal the pain of oppression and marginalization.

Shashi Deshpande carefully analyses the characteristics of the female mind, probing deep into the enigmas of the woman's self, which is caught between patriarchy, cultures, individuality, and her longing to create a permanent status in the society. In "That Long Silence", Shashi Deshpande centers around the emerging new woman who attempts to destroy the silence and miseries that society forces upon her. Deshpande has shown the dilemma, anxieties, disputes, disappointments, and passions of a self, created by gender and social influences. The Handmaid's Tale is written by Margaret Atwood and it represents a dystopian society called Gilead which is shattered by conflicts because of spiritual fanaticism and cruelty towards the female bodies. In that dystopian society, women were denied humanness and used as handmaids whose sole task is to produce future generations. Atwood portrays the abuse and marginalization of the females in the male chauvinistic society and gives a voice to show their opinions and emotions. This story can be viewed as a mirror of the woman's struggle of being used and restricted by society because of the fixed role built upon them.

The two novels put forward the idea that only through the process of understanding the self and self-development the women could destroy their inbuilt room of misery and suffering. According to Sarala Palkar, "Women should accept their responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their victimization. It is only through vigilance and courage they begin to change their life." The woman could only achieve her individuality and freedom through asserting her identity. The traditional patriarchal system has to be changed. Our society demands a submissive, docile, fearful, helpless, and silent nature from women. But if the women can tackle these situations and liberate themselves from those constraints, they will be able to stand in an equal position with men and develop their real characteristics.

STRANGLED IN SILENCE.

The novel, "That long silence" is an example of the helpless and subdued silence of an Indian Housewife. It portrays the internal conflict of Jaya and her journey for her identity or individuality. Throughout the novel, Deshpande describes Jaya as the silent sacrifice for her marital relationship. At the end of the story, she ends the long silence for the value of her life. In "The Handmaid's Tale", the female lead Offred is shown as a representation of a victim in a male-constructed society. She takes her forced position willingly and that's the only thing she's able to do. But still, in the end, through revaluation, she reflects on her assigned role to find freedom and self-realization.

Throughout the novel, Deshpande describes Jaya as the silent sacrifice for her marital relationship. From childhood itself, she is told stories of Sita, Savitri, and Drupadi, stories of sharing their husband's labors and of their silent misery. In that way, she was conditioned to follow the role of a traditional, docile, faithful wife. So, it is clear that Jaya was a victim right from her childhood, which even continues in the present. According to MeenaShiwadkar: "Ancient Indian literature and mythology have internalized the concept of the sacrificing mother and the devoted, enduring wife through the image of Sita, Savitri, and Shakuntala." (The Image of Indian Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel, 19) Besides she was informed by her grandmother that "a husband is like a sheltering tree, and the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you." (TLS, 138) Even though in the beginning she refused to accept them, gradually her self investigation put forward the idea that traditionally, a woman has an identification only as a "Husband's wife or Father's daughter or Son's mother, etc. The true personality of a woman is unknown. In the novel, Deshpande carefully examines the situations and circumstances where the women feel trapped between tradition and patriarchy. Their identities and their personality are crushed, and they have been silenced by the patriarchal rules that lead them to total confusion and torment along with loss of self-identity and self-prestige.

In *That Long Silence*, Jaya is represented as a suppressed woman who is forced to do the part that her husband instructed her to do. She is unable to speak a single word against him. Jaya is controlled in all the stages of her life, compromised to adjust to the role of an ideal Indian woman. She doesn't have a voice of her own. In her whole life, she was always lonely. Despite her marriage to Mohan and becoming the mother of two children, she is lonely. Her husband doesn't understand how she feels inside. Her husband does not allow her to continue her writing, as her husband restricts her. She is deeply wounded by the fact that she cannot write anymore. She confesses, "I had known that it hadn't mattered to Mohan that I had written a good story, a story about a couple, a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body. For Mohan, it had mattered that people might think the couple was us, that the man him. To Mohan, I had been no writer, only an exhibitionist" (TLS 144).

At the point of this transition in their marital life, Jaya and Mohan became indifferent to each other, as if in all the three years of their marriage they have never understood each other. Jaya thinks that Mohan's criticism hints that she had failed in her career as a wife and a mother.

To succeed and maintain her marital life, Jaya gives up her writing career. Very systematically she separates herself from everyone and everybody that posed even the slightest threat to what she considered to be the peace of her family. Jaya is not able to find her individuality and she is not able to appreciate her current status as Mohan's wife. She recognizes herself as someone's daughter or wife or mother, neglecting her own identity. She, comments: "I was born. My father died. When I was fifteen I got married to Mohan. I've two children, and I did not let a third live". This sentence indicates the abortion of her third child. Till this point of abortion, she had been leading a passive role of a wife to fit her husband's requirement. She endures all the sufferings and leads a life of a devoted wife's role even at the stage of losing her personality. She identifies her bond with her husband as: "I am Mohan's wife I had though, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife". This clearly shows that Jaya completely lost herself to her husband. She chooses to be more passive, pleasing to make her husband satisfied.

Margaret Atwood's in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* describes the life of Offred, a Handmaid in the city of Gilead, a dictatorial and theocratic state that has replaced the United States of America. The generation rate of Gilead is very low and because of that, the productive women were held as handmaids in the house of officers whose wives are infertile. In the novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood addressed the issues of oppression and gender disharmony faced by women in a male-constructed society like Gilead through the female lead Offred. Atwood depicts that the male-centered views and laws in Gilead don't allow the woman's consciousness to interact. Through this novel, Atwood tries to give a voice to the subdued views of the female lead Offred and advises expressing her rage and find a way to transform her life.

Here in this male chauvinistic society, Offred, the female protagonist in the novel, is restricted from her rights. She is not allowed to study, build companionship or make any other contact. The motto of the Gileadian society is "return to traditional values" and through gender roles and the oppression of women by men the society suppresses the individuality of the women. Offred says: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter." (HT 79-80) Offred was in custody with other females who were training as handmaids. Even though they were together, they were not able to wipe each other's pain and troubles. They had treated as captives who do not have any right to interact with men but to listen and follow their commands.

By analyzing the whole atmosphere of the novel, it is clear that the handmaids could not communicate their thoughts with each other. The government made these laws to protect their

privacy and to prevent the escape of the subjugated handmaids. The handmaids generally viewed the males with the eyes of terror and fear. Offred slowly understood that she constantly been warned by the Gileadean laws and orders that divide classes of the community according to their assigned roles. Atwood, in this novel, depicts the perplexity of having to choose between self and the convention. She also portrays the oppression and gender differentiation operative within a male-centered dystopian society. Atwood uses various narrative techniques to go deep into Offred's psyche. The developing self-discovery of Offred leads to a rebellious nature similarly to Jaya, towards social injustice and judgments that result in the dispute between her real self and the surroundings.

While examining the story and character of Jaya it is clear that a kind of split personality is building upon her because of the ignorant and egoistic nature of her husband Mohan.

"And I was Jaya. But I had been Suhasini as well. I can see her now, the Suhasini who was distinct from Jaya, a soft, smiling, placid, placid, Motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped." (TLS, 16)

The above passage from *That Long Silence* is a piece of representation of the emotional state of Jaya presents society's notion of an ideal woman in a Marital life. Jaya finds out that the first victim of the marriage was her identity. Jaya realizes that being a woman, she must mold her identity according to the wishes of her husband. Thus the family fixes the women in the trap of dual identity, with the real women caught somewhere between the two. Like Handmaid, In *That long silence*, Jaya's Saptagiri Aji is also a victim of the kept male dominion. She is conditioned to keep their family happy one should have high endurance. She shoots the traditional concept of docile wives and silent women in the subconscious of Jaya. She tells Jaya that a family's happiness and harmony are reliant on a woman. The representation of a blissful marital life is actually based on complete agreement with the male-constructed vision of a happy marital bond. It's clear that if a woman represses her wants and wishes to satisfy her husband's wishes, it may direct to joy following in love among the pair. The idea of domination over female is created by men and women are bound to live a mediocre life below their control.

In the society of Gilead, the liberty of expression was completely banned for women. It is considered a complete offense. The Gileadean society had its Glossary that completely ignores the truth just to serve the demands of the elite class. It was made forbidden for women to have a job; Gilead creates a system of titles. Offred is very much confused about her identity in the city of Gilead and decides to admit the role that was imposed upon her by society. It seems strange that one might accept such radical changes so easily. Offred's mind has been molded to believe the laws and patterns of the corrupt system. They were manipulated to believe that whatever has been put forward by the government it was all designed for their good.

Just like Jaya in *That Long Silence*, Offred has identified her dual life. Offred is completely aware that their outer life is based on society's accepted customs and conventions but her inner life is in rebel towards all these directed roles and patterns. Offred distinguishes between her inner self and her outer false self. She states, "My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (THT 62). Now Offred becomes divided from her body because she understood that the state has taken her control over her desires for freedom and relationship. She is not able to think as she likes or do the things that give her pleasure.

Offred is completely withdrawn from her self and it is obvious when she checks her figure in the glass. She observes herself as a "distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as a danger" (THT 9) Offred's unpleasant reference to herself as the "Little Red Riding Hood" is a representation of her

submissive and victimized status. Offred's self-image reflecting from the glass can be compared to women who are mistreated by tags that have been assigned to them. Offred is not able to own her identity and self because she is well aware that the chauvinistic society's laws and customs have fragmented her inner self that even if she tries to hold her soul that won't identify with her current state.

The two novels, *That long silence*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* show the fragmented self of the female leads. The conflict between their inner and outer lives is fragmenting both the characters Jaya and Offred. Margaret Atwood and Shashi Deshpande through these two novels are indirectly speaking against the gender-based difference and inspiring the women to destroy their silence and call for their rights. The writers make it clear that a balanced accomplished life is not a utopian fantasy for women if they recognize their creative power to eradicate their conditioning and free them from oppression and subjugation from the patriarchal society.

EMERGENCE OF NEW WOMEN.

The feminist theory put forward the enigma of "self". The journey to know the self is a common theme of feminist writing and feminist literary criticism. Shashi Deshpande has always attempted to create a new woman out of her protagonists belonging to diverse social, religious, and linguistic backdrops. In a way, Deshpande questions the patriarchal institution that discourages and destroys the basic creativity and identity of women. In the last phase of Jaya's life, Deshpande applies the elements of the new woman and portrays Jaya as a woman who is about to break her long silence towards patriarchy and Gender discrimination. There are ample references in the novel that shows Jaya is about to break her submissive nature and long silence. She says "I will have to erase the silence between us." (TLS, 192) Finally, when Jaya recognized her state, she is not able to accept the initial picture of "a pair of bullocks yoked together", (TLS, 89) indicating a cold marital life. The initial careless Jaya matures into a thoughtful woman, and with her understanding, the darkness that befalls Jaya and Mohan disappear.

From day one of her marriage till the present, Jaya admits that Mohan never accepted her as Jaya but he wanted her to be soft-spoken, obedient, always smiling, ready to serve, etc. So, he had renamed her as Suhasini Mohan never admitted the individuality of Jaya. That's the main reason why he told Jaya to discontinue her writing career. He wanted a simple wife, not a complicated object which will complicate his life. Jaya vocalized her opinion by saying; "Suhansi was dead: yes, that was it, she was the one Mohan was mourning, I'd killed her." (TLS, 125) This attitude in her has great importance. This is the point where Mohan understood that he lost control of his wife. He understood that Jaya now is about to choose her path even if he doesn't support her.

Her action replaced breaking the long silence results in replacing the joy and peace in the family. No one's pride is at stake. All have an equal voice and have a right to express their emotions. The breaking of the long silence of Jaya ensures a comfortable and harmonious life ahead and that they will not again step on the same mistake. Through her protagonist, Shashi Deshpande conveys a note to the world that "where lies the root of domestic joy, understanding, there lies the joy and bliss in the family." In conclusion, it may be observed that the crises in her life made Jaya a strong woman. The novel also compares the condition of those women who failed to voice and break their silence, with Jaya who finally thought of breaking her silence. The traumatic events that happened made her rethink holding her precious self and reliving it once more. The novel highlights the present human state where people have to speak for their values and status.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood Portrays Offred's conflict with the present name which is given by the state indicates the search for her real self. The name 'Offred' indicates herself as a handmaid to

be kept by Commander to produce a new generation. He rejects her past identity as a devoted wife, loving mother, and competent worker. Offred explains her search for individuality in the following lines:

"My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past." (THL, 192)

Offred tries to reveal her real self which she thought of destroyed in the male-dominated society. She understood that her identity is lost in this patriarchal society just like the other characteristics of her. Through her, Atwood makes it clear that nobody in the Gileadean world identifies her with her real name and status because the people there are restricted to do so. Even though Offred tries to convince her conscious that the real name is not important to her but that is a lie. Inside her, there is a rebel who knows that her real name is important to her as is her life.

Jaya in *That Long Silence* attempts to identify her self through the twist and turns of her life. Mohan loses his job and left home. These difficult situations make her depend on herself more than anything. She decides to continue in her writing career and also not to submit to the patriarchal notion of society. This incident makes her financially and socially independent. Her connection with Kamath was pure and that was the only bond that kept her out of emotional sterility and she feels a revived interest in living. Kamath approaches her with admiration and pays attention to her views, which makes her valuable. Despite this concern in life and trust in her capabilities, Jaya encounters a struggle in her commitment to her marital relationship. She is upset that if she is the creator of her life or it is the order of destiny.

Jaya solves the struggle by discarding the thought that the experiences of women are fated and she chooses to remain unconventional and decides to be away from male-constructed ideas and opinions about women. Finally, she realizes that the writing practice encourages her to come to terms with the truth. Through her lead Shashi Deshpande conveys a message to the whole of humanity as "to where lies the root of domestic joy, understanding, there lies the joy and bliss in the family". Therefore, this is the process by which a person searches for individuality and self-actualization are reflected in the leads of the novels who have passed through a significant number of clashes with men in their life.

Finally, Offred is about to take the charge for her actions when she understood that the authority might have a clue about why she is behaving like a disrupt. Here Offred is willing to permit rejecting herself because she only thought about of survival:

"Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce ... I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject." (THT 266)

In her captivity, she also contemplates suicide. Because at that time she thinks that her death is the only escape from this troublesome life. But soon Offred decides to "Live in the present, make the most of it, it's all you've got" (THT 131). When she was in the captivity, Offred decides to hold herself and life over death. She refuses to be a victim of the state.

CONCLUSION

Parallel investigation of the novels confirms that gender discrimination and subjugation is a

common incident if the women choose to obey male-constructed characteristics assigned to them by the patriarchal society. The study proves that both the leads Jaya and Offred confront emotional and mental pain that originates from gender distinction. Both the novels, Shashi Deshpande's *"That Long Silence"* and Margaret Atwood's *"The Handmaid's Tale"* presents male chauvinism in society. Even though Offred and Jaya are doing their given roles and yet they are not satisfied with their lives. Both the female characters, in the beginning, think that only through surrendering to the constructed roles of the patriarchal society they could attain their self-satisfaction and happiness. Atwood in her novel, *"The Handmaid's Tale"*, presents a dystopian society in which females are classified on the capacity to provide a new generation. The handmaids are not given their original names. They are identified based on their uniforms and production capacity. Shashi Deshpande's *"That Long Silence"* is introduced from the Eastern Indian perspective, where the female lead is a typical Indian housewife. Her husband Mohan keeps on alleging his power over Jaya in distinct ways.

Both novels address similar arguments of the male-constructed roles and tasks devised for the women to obey without considering their understanding or approval. The distress and psychological dilemma slowly make the women aware of their position in society and both of them begin speculating on their position in the society. This particular perception provides them the spirit to strive for their freedom. Offred, fortunately, escapes from the Gileadean society, and Jaya has now arrived at a point in her life where she is ready to enrich her knowledge of life with her own experience, an action that is both masks shattering and empowering.

This particular study provides the understanding that oppression and suppression of the female identity is not just the obstacle of one society or culture. It is there everywhere in the world. The current study confirmed that liberty from subjugation and prejudices could only be demolished if females question the so called designated positions and accept that they are the creator of their chances. The recovery from the oppression of patriarchy could only be done through self-development and self-discovery.

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