

# Identity, Subjectivity and the ‘Self’

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**Abstract** –This paper aims at exploring the idea of 'self' in relation to the concepts of 'identity' and 'subjectivity' by analysing the character called Jaya in Shashi Deshpande's novel 'That Long Silence'. Jaya is a middle class married woman who is educated and is a writer. She lives in a claustrophobic and suppressive environment and accepts passively, both the small which middle class existence offers to a woman in a metropolitan city and the unjust demands made by a self - centred husband and his family.

## I INTRODUCTION

In the novel we have a female protagonist who finds herself silenced through years of domestication. She is educated and a writer. She can express herself but she finds that there is hardly any scope for expressing herself openly. She can say only what fits the roles that are ascribed to her. The novel provides enough evidence to suggest that she has tried hard to fit into the role of a 'good wife', a 'good daughter - in - law' etc. However it is the nebulousness of the ascribed role, in spite of the essentialization involved which leaves her with a sense of defeat. Her education has made her aware of her subjectivity but the existing reality of the society makes impossible for her to exercise any agency by putting up meaningful resistance. She allows herself to be described by others. As a subject she finds herself continually in the defensive but incapable of fighting back. According to her husband 'quarrelling is unwomanly'. We find that Jaya has allowed herself to be circumscribed by rigid beliefs which work against her. The discourse regarding women with its ancient historical dimensions has incapacitated not just her but all those who play a role in shaping her identity. Her identity is what she has become. Though there seems to be an outward acceptance of the kind of identity that is imposed on her we find that she suffers from internal turmoil. A sense that 'all is not as it should be' troubles her. Such introspection is possible because of the education she has received. This education has also made her an individual. She perceives herself as a writer who can very well express herself. She takes her subjectivity seriously but it is the subjecting discourse - its all

pervasiveness which reduces her to a silent and automaton - like state. This all pervasiveness of a suppressive discourse makes resistance impossible. The nature of discourse in relation to women is so 'disempowering' that it seems to result in a total moral degradation. Her husband has been accused of 'malpractice' at his place of work yet all agency seems to have been appropriated by him. He also enjoys all choice. He can create a situation and then walk out of it i.e. he enjoys the freedom which is denied to her.

Though the protagonist does not put up resistance in real life she writes a novel which is her way of resisting. The writer in her is exasperated by the impossibility of any change in the cultural position of women in the Indian set up. This is her story. She is herself a writer and all her awareness has not saved her from having to fulfil 'gender expectations'. She is instructed by her father to 'always keep her husband happy' and she adheres. We can see that this is a manifestation of the interpellation which she cannot get rid of. She cannot negotiate. She looks upon herself as an 'object' as she thinks only about what is being 'done' to her and never about what she can do. She does not think about what effect the task of making another man happy will have on her. She conforms without questioning. There is no negotiation from her side. As a result she has to accept an identity imposed on her from outside. Her act of writing the novel is her act of negotiation. Through her novel she raises questions regarding her social existence. The novel raises some very important questions e.g.

1. What does being 'Jaya' mean to Jaya? Is there anything that can be termed as a 'self' - an 'I' which can operate independently without being affected or controlled by external reality. In the context of the novel we must remember that Jaya's name is changed to 'Suhasini' after her marriage. This gives rise to another question-
2. Is there anything in a name after all? Is there never any stable or unchanging position from which we can relate to the external world?



3. How does 'Jaya' in Jaya respond to Suhasini?

Donald Hall explains the concept of subjectivity and its treatment in the early modern era and during enlightenment by citing the example of the play 'Hamlet'. In this play Shakespeare mockingly makes Laertes give, what Hall terms as 'facile' advice to his son Polonius - "This above all, to thine own self be true". Neither Laertes, nor Polonius are capable of understanding the truth of the thinking self - that it can be paralysed by that which defines it - thought. An example of such a thought paralysed person is Hamlet, who attempts to 'think' his way into 'action' and to pinpoint and address deficiencies in his self."

In case of Jaya we must remember that the name Jaya has been given to her by her own people. It means 'victory'. Can Jaya's 'I' be different from what she is willed to be by people who play an important role in her life? Can she withstand the inevitable interpellation and discover for herself an independent 'self'? Or must she meekly accept the 'self' that is more or less given to her or even prescribed for her? There has been some intervention in the process of her interpellation in the form of the education she has received. Education works in two ways. It enforces certain traits enforced by the society and at the same time enables one to question them. That interpellation in Jaya's case is not totally successful and she gains an ability to reflect upon and to question and feel dissatisfied with her existing situation.. However her ability to question does not surface as long as she is under the influence of her father. Jaya, Antigone like, performs unflinchingly all duties prescribed by the society. For Jaya, her father's world is a moral dictum to be followed verbatim. Her father has instructed her 'to make her husband happy' and throughout her life she tries 'not to make him unhappy'.

We find that Jaya's father, not unlike Jaya herself, is a victim of social conditioning. He can think of 'victory' for his daughter in her husband's house only in terms of submission. So there is an attempt on his part to impose upon her the identity of a 'good wife'. Her husband also does the same. In her analysis of 'identity' Judith Butler points out that there always remains a psychic excess beyond that which is named and out of which agency becomes. This is not to say that agency would pre-exist the process of

subjectivisation; the appearance of an excess itself is made possible by the process of the 'naming self'. As explained by Linda Martin Alcoff this means that interpellation or naming, creates an identity, the inadequacy of which 'produces the excess; it is on the basis of the excess that one resists the imposition of identity, but it is only because one has identity that one can act.

The excess in Jaya is expressed in the form of monologue or internal dialogue. This is her resistance. So her resistance remains limited to herself while outwardly she sticks to the identities conferred on her. When her father essentializes her as a 'woman ' and therefore prescribes that 'her prime duty is to make her husband happy' he is conferring on her an 'injurious name'. Undoubtedly this name is going to bring to her a certain existence which has through discourse, been made the only meaningful existence possible for a woman (in Indian society). Though Jaya is affected by the injurious term she does not seem to resist or oppose it but only feels betrayed that her acceptance of identity has failed to bring to her the expected satisfaction, perhaps because she has not developed awareness of the possible injury that marriage will cause to her. It is the non - negotiability of this imposition - its one sidedness and non - reciprocity that is gradually discovered by her, but the discovery is not followed by any retaliatory action.

Jaya is not an independent self but a product of a 'symbolic order' which has privileged the male sex with a power which affects both men and women by developing a kind of 'phallogocentricity' in attitude. Jaya's unquestioned acceptance of the father's word indicates an obeisance to power with various naive assumptions. The mother's disempowered, unglamorous identity is ignored. It is only much later Jaya realised that the discourse of patriarchy will benefit only its male heirs. There is a hint of realisation on her part that she should have identified with her mother. There is, in case of Jaya, a submission to the world of the 'other'. When she enters her husband's house a new identity is imposed on her in the form of a new name. Now she is 'Suhasini ' for that is what her husband expects her to be. Her former self which found an expression earlier must now be expressed, though it cannot be totally vanquished it is silenced, as is reflected in the title of the novel 'That Long Silence'. Throughout the novel she is aware of



### REFERENCES

this suppressed 'self' that responds to the newly imposed identity in various ways. It is the previous self that can make out to her, her 'subjectedness'. Yet she is interpellated beyond possible resistance. Perhaps the fear of resistance is the fear of social extinction. She must continue to seek recognition within the house and therefore submit to be 'Suhasini' - a woman with a gentle smile.

As has been pointed out by a group of post structuralist thinkers e.g. Butler, Derrida, Freud and Foucault, social naming alienates. This is true of all naming. Jaya is alienated. In her husband's house she is essentially an outsider - one observing herself - i.e. she is both subject and subjected. What critics fail to understand is her acceptance - her lack of resistance. The writer claims that by making Jaya as she is she has tried to project a realistic picture of the lives of most of the middle - class women in India. Presenting a realistic picture is in itself a form of resistance to the kind of subjectedness which makes women look helplessly at their subjectivity. The writer makes the protagonist read herself like a text. Though Jaya does not seem to be strong enough to question the use of patriarchal language, exercise of power, assumptions regarding sexuality we find her making a record of all these to herself. As has been pointed out by Paula Moyà in her book 'Reclaiming Identities', "Subjectivity, as a crucial concept, invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable and to what extent it is something over which we have any measure of control" Subjectivity is therefore an intersection of epistemology and ontology – i.e. our perception of existing reality. Jaya has some knowledge about the relation between social and individual existence but she cannot politicise it, use it to gain control either on her own or other people's lives. She allows her identity to be fixed through gendering. When Deshpande creates a character like Jaya's she is also pointing out how most Indian middle class female population is aware of continuous oppression but refuse to accept responsibility of agency and change. They choose the easy unethical way of acceptance and go on leading a restricted, circumscribed but cushioned and protected life and escape also the 'moral agony' which is an inseparable part of a life of those who choose to exercise agency and assert freedom.

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