

**QUEST FOR VOICE AND WORDS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S
TALE AND SHASHI DESHPANDE'S THAT LONG SILENCE**

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The comparative method of studying a piece of work invites a host of associations involving a great scope. A comparative study of literary works casts a qualitative impression on the readers and touches the fringe of their hearts. The variety of literatures reflects a regionally diverse and multicultural society.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* are the two novels taken for comparative study. Both novels are an effort of these two writers to break the long silence that has surrounded women, their experiences and their world. The present study traces the female protagonist's passage through a plethora of self doubts, fears, guilt, smothered anger and oppression of individuality and silence towards affirmation and individuality. The

intention of this study is to examine the silent female protagonists' need for voice and words for their subdued silence.

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian novelist, literary critic, essayist, and environmental activist. She is among the most eminent authors of fiction in recent history. She is a winner of the Arthur C. Clarke and Prince Of Asturias award for Literature. Shashi Deshpande is one of the most accomplished and versatile contemporary Indian women writers in English. Her novels and short stories explore the psyche of the educated middle class Indian woman. With rare sensitivity and depth, she portrays the dilemma of the Indian woman trapped between her own aspirations as an individual and the forces of patriarchy which confine her. Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* published in 1983. It received the Sahitya Akadami Award in 1991.

In *That Long Silence* Shashi Deshpande delineates the joy and despair of the narrator/protagonist Jaya “ caught in an emotional eddy, endeavors to come to terms with her protean roles, while trying , albeit in vain, to rediscover her true self, which is but an ephemeraan unfulfilled wife, a disappointed mother and a failed writer” (Times Of India 2)

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* narrates the tale of Offred (Handmaid) in Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic state that has replaced the United States of America. Because of dangerously low reproduction rates, Handmaids are assigned to bear children for elite couples that have trouble in conceiving. Offred serves the Commander and his wife. Offred is not the narrator's real name. Handmaid names consist of the word “of” followed

by the name of the Handmaid's Commander. Atwood recognizes the subjugation and marginalization of women in patriarchal society. The powerful people cannot tolerate woman's consciousness to communicate. Atwood gives a voice to the suppressed thoughts of her female character Offred and suggests to express anger and find a way for change.

Offred and Jaya both are meek, submissive and denied to communicate and express. They are deprived of even their original names that is a token of identity . They are put in the different slots of a mother, a wife, a friend, and a mistress. In an anxiety to fulfill multiple functions and in performing different roles Jaya and Offred both are in crisis on all fronts.

Gilead, a group of conservative religious extremists has taken power and turned the sexual revolution on its head. Gilead is a society founded on a "return to traditional values" and gender roles, and on the subjugation of women by men. Women in Gilead are not only forbidden to vote, they are forbidden to read or write. Atwood's novel also paints a picture of a world undone by pollution and infertility, reflecting 1980s fears about declining birthrates, the dangers of nuclear power and environmental degradation. Similarly Jaya too loses her identity and has to forge a new identity and name suiting her husband's desires. Jaya means victory but her husband calls her Suhasini that means a placid motherly woman. Name is the only component that makes a person unique but with the loss of her name she lost her identity. Shashi Deshpande makes her central character Jaya to tell her story. Jaya puts herself in the slot of a mother and a wife. She puts her husband and children also into the slots and feels disappointed when they refuse to confine themselves there. In her anxiety to fulfill multiple functions Jaya is in crisis on all fronts – as a mother, a wife a sister, a friend and above all an Indian woman.

Despite her marriage to Mohan and becoming a mother of two children, she is lonely. Mohan moulds her feelings as he likes and Jaya remains silent. She is torn from within. Jaya moulds her self perception and she assesses her worth not as an individual but by her capability to model herself upon the dreams of her husband. She reconciles with the pattern of the docile and silent women of Mohan's family. She swings between desires and disgust and tries to bridge the gap between the mythicized wife and mother and her own experiences of being a wife and a mother. She accepts her identity of Mohan's wife of Suhasini, and adjusts as a "Smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who coped."(LS-15) Offred's name is not original but imposed. Offred says, "My name is not Offred. I have another name, which nobody uses now because it is forbiddenname is like your phone numbers useful only to others" (HT-79-80) Like Offred Jaya suppresses her desires and loses her identity even in petty day to day affairs. She is afraid that a frank admission of her desires may disturb the delicate balance of her relationships. To survive emotionally she prefers to live in a make believe world of her own. Through timidity, awkwardness or laziness she surrenders her decisions to her husband. Jaya teaches herself to wait in silence. She feels bewildered when she thinks about her –"Self", "To know what you wantI have been denied thatEven now I don't know what I want."(LS 25) She feels suffocated and sometimes thinks to escape from the grim realities of life but escapism is not a solution for her. A permanent solution comes from within, not from outside. So she makes a compromise as a survival strategy for getting happiness from conjugal life. It is the outcome of her long silence and maturity which Jaya undergoes. Suhasini and Jaya, these two names symbolize two aspects of the same personality. The former Jaya symbolizes victory, the desire of her father and later Suhasini represents her husband's

expectations from her that is flattering submission “Though, when he wrote my name, it had been ‘Suhasini’, not Jaya. And if I disowned the name, he had never failed to say reproachfully, ‘I choose that name for you’”. (191)

In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Gilead promotes fragmentation. The women are divided in different classes according to their set roles and are identified with their uniforms.

The new world of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a woman's world, even though governed, seemingly, and policed by men. Its ethos is entirely domestic, its female population is divided into classes based on household functions, each class clad in a separate color that instantly identifies the wearer - dull green for the Marthas (houseworkers); blue for the Wives; red, blue and green stripes for the Econowives (working class); red for the Handmaids (whose function is to bear children to the head of the household) brown for the Aunts (a thought-control force, part-governess, part-reform-school matron). Offred considers herself “ a distorted shadow, a parody of something , some fairytale figure in red cloak” (HT 19) Because of dangerously low reproduction rates, Handmaids are assigned to bear children for elite couples and such subjugation creates a society in which women are treated as subhuman. They are reduced to their fertility, treated as nothing more than a set of ovaries and a womb. In one of the novel’s key scenes, Offred lies in the bath and reflects that, before Gilead, she considered her body an instrument of her desires; now, she is just a mound of flesh surrounding a womb that must be filled in order to make her useful. Gilead seeks to deprive women of their individuality in order

to make them docile carriers of the next generation. “ we are two legged wombs that is all: sacred vessels”(146)

The handmaid is declared unwoman if she fails to conceive and consequently she is banished to the colonies where women clean up radio active waste as slave labourers. Offred comments “ there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren this is the law” (57) Offred wants to survive, and the best way to survive is to learn to bear her chains. When she bears them too well, they become almost comforting to her. Her captivity becomes familiar, and the prospect of a new, free life becomes scary. Jaya and Offred keep on swinging in opinions and choices. They recall the past of their life and confront with the truths of present.

In her anxiety to fulfill her role as a wife Jaya has not done justice to her human instinct also. This is what happens in Jaya’s relationship with Kamat. Jaya was more free and uninhibited with him than she was with her husband. But in Indian society this kind of friendship is always looked upon with suspicion and disapproval. That is why when Jaya had found Kamat lying dead on the floor, she left the place in silence. But what really upsets her was the fact in order not to damage her married life. Offred too has same experience. She thinks of the Red Center, and how Moira was brought there three weeks after her own arrival. Moira and Offred pretended not to know one another because friendships aroused suspicion. They arranged to meet in the restroom to exchange a few words, which made Offred feel terribly happy .

Freedom of speech is officially forbidden in Gilead because it is an offence for the women. Gilead creates an official vocabulary that ignores and warps reality in order to serve the needs of the new society’s elite. Having made it illegal for women to hold jobs, Gilead creates a

system of titles. Whereas men are defined by their military rank, women are defined solely by their gender roles as Wives, Handmaids, or Marthas. Stripping them of permanent individual names strips them of their individuality. There are prescribed greetings for personal encounters, and to fail to offer the correct greetings is to fall under suspicion of disloyalty. The use of language has become illicit for women. It renders the illicit use of language almost sexual. Offred may think so fiercely of words and take such solace in the repetition of memories because doing so helps her to retain her knowledge of language. When the Commander allows Offred to read or plays scrabble with her, she realizes they are practicing a kind of "kinky" sexual act. Now it is forbidden for us now it is dangerous. It is indecent" (149)

Jaya too faces restrictions on communicating her inner feelings. Although Mohan takes pride in her hobby yet he snatches the intellectual freedom from her which is essential for the free expression of her hidden thoughts and longings for a satisfied life. His objection is why did she write a story about a couple where the man could not reach his wife except through her body. Mohan is worried that people will take him as that man. He objects “ And you, how could you write these things, how could you write such ugly things, how will you face people after this?” (LS 143) Kamat who is critic friend of her suggests her to reveal her anger and strong feelings through her writings but she follows Mohan to whom “ A woman can never be angry, she can only be neurotic, hysterical and frustrated.” (147) Her ‘Seeta’ stories are not what she wants to write but what Mohan wants her to write. In the words of Guru Charan Bahera “ It is about a writer self consciously trying to put into words her own experiences which brings in the act of writing itself. It is replete with reflections on literature particularly women’s writing, a woman engaged in the activity of writing confronting the masculine gaze.” (Naik 131)

A study of these novels shows that the female protagonists are subjugated by patriarchal power. They have lost their names, identity and their freedom is curtailed for communication. They are mere helpmates and pushed into one corner. They have severe restrictions on their free movement. Offred lives in a room fitted out with curtains, a pillow, a framed picture, and a braided rug. There is no glass in the room, not even over the framed picture. The window does not open completely, and the windowpane is shatterproof. There is nothing in the room from which one could hang a rope, and the door does not lock or even shut completely. Looking around, Offred remembers how Aunt Lydia told her to consider her circumstances a privilege, not a prison. In the same way the exile at Dadar flat serves to show to Jaya that she has distanced herself from her inner self because she has forgotten that she is an individual too, requiring a self definition in her own right.

Offred is confused about her identity and even starts to accept the role that has been imposed upon her. It seems strange that one might accept such radical changes so easily. Offred has been manipulated into believing that this sinister system was designed for her own good. Peter S. Prescott says: " Offred at first accepts assurance that the new order is for her protection." (Naik 151) She even starts to measure her self-worth by the viability of her ovaries and this negatively affects her self-image. This is how Offred characterizes the deploring act : "The commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I don't say making love because that's not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate because it would imply two people, when there is only one. Nor does rape cover it. Nothing was going on here that I

haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice, but there was some and this is what I chose.”

(HT 121)

This statement is very dangerous. It shows how Offred has convinced herself that this deploring act is not so bad. It also shows how she is beginning to embrace the system and justify the violations that are being committed against her. By calling it a choice she has shifted the blame from her oppressors to herself and labeled the blatant crime as a mere ritual. She has memories of a life that has ripped from her. She can remember years before, when she had a husband and child, when she had a job, money, and access to knowledge. All of these things conflict her perception of Gilead and make her want to rebel to get them back. Jane Gardam argues: "There is even a horrible beauty in the heroine's plight her quiet reverie of better days, her dignity, her sorrow, her courageous rationing of recollection of times past so that she will be able to bear them."(Balachandran 152) She is fighting to keep her past alive and not be sucked in entirely by the system that restrains her. She harbors a vague love, hope, and desire to see her daughter and husband someday. So she must survive for their sake because she needs to believe that they are still alive. Her dreams and reality become intertwined and this makes her fight for her sanity. Rebellion is an instinct and all people have. It's an inherent thrust for fighting oppression. Offred is driven by a thirst for freedom to love and be loved. "People don't die from lack of sex, but from lack of love". (131) All true rebels have a cause and this is Offred's.

Similarly in Jaya's case through the process of thinking and writing down her thoughts, she retraces her life back to her childhood, through the disorderly, chaotic sequence of events

and nonevents that made up her life, and purges herself of her burdens she was carrying within herself. She thinks of the words, "Yathecchasi tatha kuru Do as you desire", which Krishna tells Arjuna after giving him a sermon on the battle field of Kurukshetra. Jaya interprets Krishna's words as meaning, "I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire." By the time Jaya has finished writing down her life, she is ready to face life anew, with Mohan. She decides to speak and to listen, to erase the silence that was between her and Mohan, between them and the children. She realizes " I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to ease that long silence between us". (LS 192) Jaya hopes, and knows that life has always to be made possible. The novel ends with Jaya's thoughts that " we don't change overnight. It is possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that life would be impossible."(193)

Offred and Jaya manage to communicate through words and language as a weapon to give a voice to their suppression. . Offred often secretly listens to Rita and Cora, the Marthas who work in the house where she lives. Offred wishes she could talk to them, but Marthas are not supposed to develop relationships with Handmaids. She wishes that she could share gossip like they do—gossip about how one Handmaid gave birth to a stillborn, how a wife stabbed a Handmaid with a knitting needle out of jealousy, how someone poisoned her Commander with toilet cleaner. Offred remembers renting hotel rooms and waiting for Luke to meet her, before they were married, when he was cheating on his first wife. She regrets that she did not fully appreciate the freedom to have her own space when she wanted it. She remembers examining her room in the Commander's house little by little after she first arrived. She saw stains on the

mattress, left over from long-ago sex, and she discovered a Latin phrase freshly scratched into the floor of the closet: *Nolite bastardes carborundorum*. Offred does not understand Latin. It pleases her to imagine that this message allows her to commune with the woman who wrote it. Jaya is empowered by her intellectual competence. She manages to reveal her ‘Self’ through her writing skill. The truth dawns upon Jaya that she had shaped herself absolutely according to Mohan’s desires and that was the reason of blankness and silence in her life. But she suddenly realizes “ what have I achieved by writing this?” She only finds that has become confident and has gained courage to ‘ plug the hole in the heart “, to “erase the silence between us”, to speak sanskrit instead of ‘Prakrit’ and make the life possible. As she says “ well , I have achieved this. I am not afraid anymore. The panic has gone. I am Mohan’s wife, I had thought and cut off the bits of me that has refused to be Mohan’s wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible”(191) She decides to write what she wants to write and not to lookup at Mohan’s face for an answer she wants. Sumitra Kukreti remarks, “ The realization that she can have her own way –yathaecchasi tatha kuru – gives a new confidence to Jaya. This is her emancipation” (197)

These two novels have been peculiarly characterized by silence. The protagonists of these writers belong to a class where silence has been imposed on women. Silence or effective silence, not being heard is a mark of women’s repression in a masculinist culture. It is, indeed, a mark of victimization. Atwood and Shashi have exposed the repressive taboos that crush a woman’s individuality. They employ the language of the interior to delineate the inner turmoil of the characters. The important insight that Atwood and Shashi impart us through Offred and Jaya that women should accept their own responsibilities for what they are, and they should realize how much they have contributed to their own victimization, instead of putting the blame

on everybody except themselves. It is only through self analysis and self understanding, through vigilance and courage, they can begin to change their lives. The heroines of Deshpande and Atwood are shown in a state of confusion at the beginning. Slowly as the novel unfolds, they go through a process of introspection, self analysis and self realization. At the end they emerge more confident, more in control of themselves and significantly more hopeful. As Jaya in *That Long Silence* concludes: "...there is always hope." (193) Similarly in *Handmaid's Tale* Offred is tired of silence. She is "tired of this melodrama. I am tired of keeping silent". (305)

Thus these two authors represent different cultures but what brings them together is how they present their characters in a similar predicament. It is interesting to see how these women give the limited capabilities to their heroines to either succumb or to overcome a tight situation. But their failures, in most cases do not deter them to go ahead to meet life's challenges. A study of this paper enables the reader to have a better understanding of the similarities in their writing. There are certain themes that recur in the fiction of these novelists. Their protagonists are always explorers through tradition and myth in search of a new identity and in search of a voice, a tongue, a language, an art, with which to proclaim that identity.

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