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234


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235


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# Table of Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Article Title &amp; Author</th>
<th>Page No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Developing Teaching Processes and Practices in the Study of Poetry at Colleges</td>
<td>1-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-- Azadeh Mehrpouyan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>Why Gerbner’s Communication Model in Trauma Studies?</td>
<td>15-33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-- Khagendra Acharya</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>Representative Folk Literature of Hindi Speaking North India</td>
<td>34-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-- Dr. R.P. Singh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>Shama Futehally’s ‘The Right Words’: The Perpetual Echoing of a Restless Soul</td>
<td>46-55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Santosh Chauhan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>Fiction and Film Adaptation: A Comparative Study</td>
<td>56-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prof. Narendra Patel &amp; Dr. Jagdish Joshi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>Indian Nation: Dream, Democracy and Paradoxes</td>
<td>70-86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Dyuti Jayendrakumar Yajnik</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>Orthodoxy and Patriarchal Dichotomy in <em>A Situation in New Delhi</em></td>
<td>87-106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Archana Singh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08</td>
<td>The Role of Art, Imagination, and Inspiration in the English Poetry</td>
<td>107-136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Dilip Bhatt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>‘Seven Steps Around the Fire’: A Saga of the Subaltern Predicament</td>
<td>137-151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ramesh B. Patel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ecolinguistic Approach to Shashi Deshpande’s the Dark Holds no Terrors</td>
<td>152-168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S.R. Adlin Asha</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contd…
### Table of Content Contd...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Article Title &amp; Author</th>
<th>Page No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 11      | The white Tiger- A cry for Freedom  
Nisarg R. Kothari | 169-178   |
| 12      | Integrate e-Governance in Higher Educational Sector  
Priyank Gokani & Dr. H. N. Pandya | 179-196   |
| 13      | वैदिक देवता – स्वातंत्र्य अन्वेषण | 197-207   |
| 14      | आशाही पुमारियों जगतवर "अमृत धारिया"  
प्रे.पी.अं.भयां | 208-215   |
| 15      | पवारवर्ज़की चर्चित्रों गृहस्वती भूमिका  
Jayshreeben Barot | 216-223   |
| 16      | Problem of Priority in That Long Silence  
Rachit Kalaria | 224-241   |
| 17      | Reading – Types & Skills  
Amisha Dave | 242-253   |
| 18      | बोक बिंदा येने नूतनतम प्रदर्शन  
Dhaduk Sonal G. | 254-260   |
| 19      | Higher Education Needs Managements Practices  
Dr. Dhiren Pandya | 261-272   |
| 20      | Estimation of Consumption and Saving Functions for India: An  
Econometric Analysis  
Sachin Mehta | 273-293   |
### Table of Content Contd...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Article Title &amp; Author</th>
<th>Page No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>A Comparative Study of Fundamental Analysis of Selected Steel Companies of India</td>
<td>294-316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Kailashben P. Damor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Development of Sector in India &amp; Role of Foreign Direct Investment with reference to economic reforms</td>
<td>317-331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Bhavsinh Dodiya</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>The Portrayal of Women Characters in Tendulkar’s Select Plays</td>
<td>332-370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Dipali Agravat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Invisible Man As A Realistic Novel</td>
<td>371-388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lad Nikunjkumar &amp; Tandel Reepal &amp; Chaudhari Dipa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Journey to Enlightenment, Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha: Eine Indische Dichtung (An Indian Poem)</td>
<td>389-412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Anila A. Pillai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Developing Scientific Attitude through Scientific Method</td>
<td>413-419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Shamsha Emanuel &amp; Ms. Dipali Gandhi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Scientific Methods of Investigation and the Rights of Accused: Some Findings from American and Indian Law</td>
<td>420-435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sudershan Verma &amp; Aparna Singh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Decision Making: An Individual’s Key to Success</td>
<td>436-459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Priti Vyas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Conservation of Tigers in India: A Critical Survey</td>
<td>460-474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Sony Singh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Article- 16: Problem of Priority in *That Long Silence*

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Most of the women writers in Indian writing in English are preoccupied with the problems and issues of Indian women. Over a period of some hundred years there is a gradual change in the Indian social set up. The earlier writers portrayed the traditional image of woman. But the later writers gave a very realistic portrayal of woman. They have dealt with the problems of working woman and her quest for self assertion and also her struggle with the forces like tradition and modernity. However, the change has brought unexpected and unknown issues in the lives of Indian women. There is an encouragement for women for participating in various social, political and economic fields. At the same time, women have yet not experienced the freedom to participate in the fields of her choice on domestic and social ground. The traditional life of women has restricted her success to enjoy equality. In all the
aspects of social matter, gender bias is still a reality. Gender is still a deciding principle for her born superiority or inferiority. The creation of a healthy society in terms of freedom and equality is still a distant reality. Woman is not provided desired opportunity to grow stronger and share her voice and choice. Though modern Indian woman has been struggling to come out from her cosseted life, there is yet some restrictions that hamper her progress. The issues refer to her submissive role assigned to her for centuries and the web of her social ties and responsibilities.

Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* narrates the story of Jaya who is also a victim of the confused condition of so called progressive and developing society. She suffers invisible conflict of thoughts. Outwardly she has a happy life, a good husband who initially encourages her to develop her professional career as a writer, she is unhappy within. She suffers a grave dilemma of her individuality and the importance of her role as a woman. She faces the dilemma of tradition and modernity, individuality and duty. This dilemma leads her to pass through a long phase of silence in search of a solution which eventually results into a conflict of priority.

Since her marriage with Mohan, Jaya is not so happy. She remembers her past when she was taught to live life in the frame of social custom. In fact she
was not willing to marry Mohan but after the death of her father everybody in the house was impatient to get her married and do away from their responsibility. In her childhood she was told stories of Sita, Savitri and Draupadi. She did not wish to fit into the roles like Sita or Draupadi. Her desires were never acknowledged and she was pushed into a life of an ordinary housewife. Jaya says, “...why I married Mohan; the truth is that he decided to marry me, I had only to acquiesce.” (94) Whenever she asked a question she was muted by reply that “for everything is question, for everything a retort. What husband can be comfortable with that?” These were initial lessons to keep silence and mutely accept husband’s treatment because “a husband is a life sheltering tree.” (137) However, she tries to fit in the given frame of her life and attempts to be a good wife and mother. Contrary to her aspiration, she adopts silence in her life.

Despite all her sincere efforts to manage her family, she does not find respect from her husband and experiences complete dominance of Mohan. This unacceptable dominance prompts her to be conscious about her identity. In the family tree she finds no place of woman. It grows only by man. Therefore, Jaya once asked Ramukaka pointing the family tree, “I’m not here!” and he replies,

“How can you be here? You don’t belong to this family! You’re married, you’re now part of Mohan’s family. You have no place here.” (143)
Jaya wanted to ask further, but she did not. She thought,

“if I don’t belong to this family, what about the Kakis and Ai? They married into this family, didn’t they, why are they not here? And what about ajji, who single-handedly kept the family together, why isn’t she here?” (143)

Jaya’s uncle, Ramukaka, once advised her, “Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you” (138) Thus, the aim of her life should encircle the happiness of her husband and should never think about what she wants. The social customs teach a woman to bury her aspiration and should keep aspiration of her husband alive. A woman can achieve salvation by looking after the comforts of her husband. Vanitamami advises Jaya at the time of her wedding that, “if your husband has a mistress or two, ignore it; take up a hobby instead – cats, maybe, or your sister’s children” (31) She is constantly taught that the success in these duties is the only aim of her life. A good wife should stand by her husband and should share his pleasure and suffering. She should not speak against him. Therefore, after Mohan’s so called involvement in malpractice in the office, she moves to Dadar flat with Mohan and helps in saving the reputation of her family. Though she does not wish to follow the traditional role of a wife she inclines to it. Like a true Indian women, she tries
to maintain a balance between the two extremes in her life as she says,

“Ours has been a delicately balanced relationship, so much so that we have even snipped off bits of ourselves to keep the scales on even keel.” (7)

Traditionally, a woman’s role assigned by the society is of subordination to man. Her life is restricted in the roles of a daughter, a wife or a mother. In each case she has to lead her life looking at the wishes of father, husband or son. A woman’s feelings and her desires are never considered seriously. She is always subordinate, inferior and dominated. She has no place of her own.

A woman has lost identity in the virtue of sacrifice that has been taught to her for centuries. Jaya also realizes that despite her effort to fulfil the expectations of Mohan and his family, her identity is ignored. Her father named her ‘Jaya’ which literally means ‘victory’, while her husband changed it and named her as ‘Suhasini’ at the time of marriage. She feels her split personality between the two names. The names are suggestive – ‘Jaya’ means victory and ‘Suhasini’ means soft, smiling and loving woman. Deshpande shows the intention of Jaya’s father and husband behind giving these names. Her father wanted her to be triumphant in her life. He was a great source of motivation for
her. He used to say that, “You are not like others, Jaya...You’re going to be different from others” (136) while Mohan wants Jaya to be Suhasini. Jaya understands the implied meaning of the name as she says,

“the Suhasini who was different from Jaya, a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped. When I think of her in this way, I know who it is that Suhasini reminds me of.” (15-16)

Her husband does not want victorious ‘Jaya’, but wants a submissive ‘Suhasini’. This act of changing her name splits her personality and compels her to move from one side to the other.

Though Jaya gets everything a woman desires after marriage – an engineer husband, social status, and two children – she does not get what she actually wanted. She wanted to come up from a traditional image of woman, but she fails in realising her dream and Mohan also fails in providing conducive atmosphere for her to come up. Her circumstances, thus, aggravate her search for identity.

In the early years of her marriage, Jaya writes stories in her column ‘Seeta’ about man-woman relationship. Gradually, her stories become popular among the readers. She becomes a popular writer and wins a prize for realistic
depiction of life in her stories. It was an effort to construct her identity which she could do successfully. But the success did not last longer. In the beginning, Mohan appreciates her art, but soon he becomes unhappy with these stories. He doubts that under the pretext of realistic stories, Jaya has written about their personal relation. Through her creative writing Jaya wants to seek her own identity, but fails to accomplish it with the false allegation of Mohan. She moves back and follows the desire of her husband.

Mohan’s way of interpreting life is inclining to the framed rules of society. He is of the view that it is in the interest of them and society to follow the rules, while Jaya thinks otherwise. She has no disgust with the customs, but she expects to have opportunity to grow individually. In a healthy society a person must be given due opportunity to grow independently. If a person is born to be subordinate or to assist others, it is injustice to him/her. Therefore, she thinks about her identity and her opportunity to grow as a writer. As she expresses her original idea in her stories, Mohan compels her to discontinue it with an allegation that she has intentionally disclosed their mutual relation through the stories. Jaya, like other Indian women, has no option but to change her way. In this context, Sarabjit Sandhu observes,
“In the Indian context, once a girl gets married to a man whether it be a love-marriage or an arranged one the husband takes complete control over her. Whether the husband follows the right path or the wrong one, she has to blindly follow in his footsteps. When Mohan is caught in an act of malpractice and is supposed to be unavailable for certain period, he assumes Jaya would accompany him. Though she is unwilling to follow the example of Sita and Savitri, paradoxically, she is compelled by the situations and circumstances…” (Sandhu:38)

She prefers to give up writing stories, but this temporary self-restriction makes her quest for self realization severe. In the wake of her desire to search her identity, she tends to socially unacceptable way. She comes into contact with Kamat, a middle-aged man whose ‘life was structured to loneliness’. (157) Kamat lives in the same apartment, and gives support to Jaya in writing stories. His intelligence draws Jaya towards him. Jaya feels very comfortable with him to share her ideas. He also takes interest in Jaya’s stories and supports her in writing good stories. He analyses her stories objectively but sympathetically. She seeks his comments to make her stories more effective. She likes his friendly and companionable nature. Unlike Mohan, he treats her as an equal, and therefore
she confides to him the things she cannot with Mohan. As she says, “I told him things I’d never been able to speak of, not to Dada, not to Mohan. I had been talking about my parents…” (153) After initial platonic relationship, she falls into physical intimacy with him. Apart from her physical intimacy which can be characterized as spontaneous, their relationship is perfect friendship based on intellectual understanding.

Kamat’s sudden death is a great shock to her. She witnesses him dying, but cannot do anything except running away from the site under the fear of disclosure of their clandestine relationship. Her behaviour at the critical time of Kamat creates Jaya’s image as an opportunist. However, it is obvious for an Indian wife to conceal her relation with a man other than her husband. As it seems an act of infidelity, Y. S. Sunita Reddy observes her behaviour that,

“In spite of the willingness of her body and the ample opportunity provided in the seclusion of his apartment, Jaya overcomes her yearning in the interest of safeguarding her marriage. The man-woman relationship, going by the norms of society, is dictated by deceit and treachery. Human beings, more often than not, prefer to go by the dictates of society rather than be truthful to themselves as individuals. Appearances have to be maintained at any cost. It is, perhaps, this which prompts Jaya to
behave in an utterly callous way on the death of Kamat.”
(Reddy : 77)

Once again her attachment with family draws her back with the fear that the revelation of her relation may spoil her family. The relation between husband and wife, in other term, is power politics within four walls. Jaya tolerates Mohan’s anger and adjust with his success and failure. As long as silence is maintained and the dominance of husband is not challenged, everything goes well. But as soon as Jaya attempts to raise her voice and expresses her feelings to grow as a writer, she is silenced. She is considered as crossing the limit of an ideal wife.

Jaya’s father wanted her to be different. Jaya also desires to fulfil the will of her father, but Mohan’s wish is quite different. His views about a good natured wife are very much streamlining the contemporary social views. For him, a good wife is sombre and silent. Capacity of suffering is the strength of a woman. Jaya analyses the difference of these views as,

“He saw strength in the woman sitting silently in front of the fire, but I saw despair. I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender.” (36)
Owing to the impending danger on his job, he finds his supremacy shuddered and instead of facing the reality he takes coward path of leaving the house and avoids responsibilities as a husband and father. On the other hand Jaya is left waiting for Mohan to return, getting desperate to find out her son, Rahul, who runs away from a picnic. Mohan does not hesitate to leave the family in critical condition while Jaya, like a true Indian wife, does everything possible to bring them together.

Again Jaya submits to Mohan, a representative of male dominated society. Jaya, though not convinced fully, retreats when her family life is in danger. She continuously thinks about her identity, but unfortunately, is not allowed as the social bondages are antithetical. As Jaya longs to grow as a writer and establish her identity, she does not want to put her family life into jeopardy. She realizes her condition as,

‘both are yoked together, so better to go to the same direction, as to go to different directions will be painful.” (10)

For an Indian woman, family comes first in her priority. It is her strength and great virtue that she prefers to sacrifice her aspiration to save the lives of her family member unaffected. However, this very virtue proves to be her weakness and is exploited sometimes. Marriage plays significant role in the life of an Indian
woman. Marriage is a remarkable phase in the life of woman in terms of changes in her personality. The life without responsibility at parental house turns into an extremely responsible and restrictive after marriage. A natural tendency makes her think and behave in accordance with her husband’s way of thinking and living. Jaya also was very angry in her childhood but soon after her marriage she learns to suppress her anger because Mohan believes that anger makes a woman ‘unwomanly’. He says, “My mother never raised her voice against my father, however badly he behaved to her.” (83) Thus, Mohan wishes his wife to tolerate his misbehaviour without complaint.

The lack of verbal anger is the key of successful marriage and Jaya learns to handle the key. They were living together for years but there was no affection between them. She says,

“It seems to me now that we had, both of us, rehearsed the roles of husband and wife so well that when the time came we could play them flawlessly, word-perfect.” (95)

Family does matter for Jaya, and hence she desires to fit in her traditional role in the beginning shaping her life completely different from her upbringing. She desires to be a good wife and make a happy family without ignoring her father’s wish of being ‘different’. But she finds no support from Mohan who remains
unchanged even after the deaths of his mother and sister in agony. Instead he glorifies it and expects Jaya also to follow the same path. The initial desire of Jaya to break the silence does not materialize. She also finds no other route, except the route of adjustment. Jaya cannot fit herself in her assigned role, nor could she succeed in breaking the silence and realize her identity. She is left searching her identity, as she says,

“...I’ll tell you what’s wrong. I’ve failed him. He expected something from me, from his wife, and I’ve failed him. All these years I thought I was Mohan’s wife; now he tells me I was never that, not really.” (185)

Deshpande frequently uses the term ‘two bullocks yoked together’ in the novel. This reminds the reader the ideological difference of husband and wife. The upbringing of Jaya is in traditional atmosphere with some liberty to think differently, while Mohan is rigid in her beliefs deeply rooted in social customs. A marriage is a social and spiritual process of uniting and harmonizing minds of husband and wife. Deshpande shows how Jaya and Mohan could not achieve this ideal union of minds. On many occasions and on many issues they differ fundamentally.
Outwardly, Mohan seems a good natured husband as he doesn’t have any bad habits and does not torture Jaya physically. However, he does not allow any liberty to his wife and has never realized the existence of Jaya as a person; on the contrary he had become rigid and suspicious. Jaya goes on compromising more and more to save her marriage and her children. Mohan goes on the way he likes and expects Jaya to agree to his wishes. Even in the case of inquiry of Mohan’s so called involvement in the malpractice, Jaya has to follow him silently. Mohan justifies,

“It was for you and the children that I did this. I wanted you to have a good life, I wanted the children to have all those things I never had.” (9)

It is this event that makes her think differently when Mohan justifies his action. She realizes the duality of Mohan’s nature. She also realizes that the notion of happiness of a wife is different from that of her male counterpart. The good life and happiness is also defined and imposed on her. There was no demand from Jaya for any materialistic comforts and yet Mohan thinks that a wife can be made happy by providing luxury to her like a caged bird. Mohan fails to realize her real anguish, and also fails to understand her expectations. He cannot allow her to grow independently and think freely. He wants her to be happy only within the boundaries of his dominance.
Jaya’s lack of communication and prevailing silence makes their relation fragile. The ill-impact of this failure is reflected in her writings. Her later stories do not have anger and emotion, and therefore, are rejected by many publishers. The lack of energy has made her life slackened. The silence between them becomes severe. To every question asked by Mohan, she keeps silence. She thinks,

“I had neither any questions nor any retorts for Mohan now, and yet there was no comfort. So many subjects were barred that the silence seemed heavy with uneasiness.” (27)

The adoption of such a long and obdurate silence lays negative impression on the part of her husband. It shows overreaction sometimes about the situations in her life. She moves between ignorance and duty. As Sarabjit Sandhu points out,

“Her negative approach coupled with her habit of discerning and analyzing every situation causes a havoc in her personal life. She does not like to submit to the male-chauvinistic ideas, for her prudence does not allow her to submit before ignorance. Thus, there ensues a struggle between ignorance and prudence.” (Sandhu : 42)
Thus, Jaya involuntarily plunges into a conflict of priority between her individuality and her married life. She wants to break her silence, but does not wish to break her marriage and emotional bondages with her children. If she fails to maintain the balance between the two, she is prone to face more crucial issues in her life, as Sarabjit Sandhu points out,

“...her covert superiority complex makes her think not only of herself but also of others which causes a type of irritability in her marital conduct. Thus, all the troubles emerge from their unequal cognitive status.” (Sandhu : 42)

All these incidents lead Jaya towards an involuntary mental conflict of setting priority. For an Indian woman it is not easy to judge what is in her interest. She prefers to keep silence which is the best possible solution to remedy her problems and continues her life in searching the answer of her priority. No doubt, she has come out with success in realising her individuality without the rejecting social and cultural background as S. Prasanna Sree writes,

“Jaya...gradually emerges as a confident individual fully in control of herself and refuses to be led by nose. A
stereotyped house wife initially nervous and needing male help and support all the time she understands that she also has contributed to her victimization and that she has to fight her own battle and work out her own strategy. It also shows how with this new confidence Jaya becomes emancipated without rejecting outright the cultural and social background.” (Prasanna Sree: xvii)

The course of Jaya’s life leads her to a continuous conflict between her search for identity and adjustment of family. In fact, these two aspects of life are opposite to each other in nature. As per Indian tradition the success of married life lies in dissolving her personality with the personality of her husband. Hence sustaining individuality and making a successful married life is very difficult for a middle class modern Indian woman. Jaya seems to move back and forth - from one extreme to the other. At various stages she determines to come out from her traditional role. She breaks her silence and also inclines to some immoral ways. But soon she becomes conscious about her family reputation, her husband and children. Her conscience does not permit her to go against the interest of her family members and therefore, follows her husband’s wishes for a long period. The reason behind this reluctance is the roots in the glorious past of Indian
tradition. Jaya only expects from society to be liberal in accepting new thoughts. She doesn’t want to be rebellious, but continuous her quest for ‘self realization’ without breaking the family ties. She succeeds in realizing her ‘self’, but fails to arrange her family matters in the right order.

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