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**CONTENTS**

Speech in Silence in Shashi Deshpande's Tanvir Sachdev 1 That Long Silence

Revisiting Thomas Gray's Elegy Churchyard	Dr. N D Dani	10	Written in a Country
Pan-African Cultural Connection and Brathwaite	Dr. Rohit Phutela	18	the Poetry of Edward K.
'Seeking the Self' : A Feministic Study of Dark Holds No Terrors	Dr. Geeta Goyal	26	Shashi Deshpande's The
Nissim Ezekiel: Evolution and His Influence Poets	John Wesly <i>NDR Chandra</i>	32	on Modern Indian English
Feminist Concerns of Nayantara Sahgal :	Pooja Singal	39	A Postcolonial Study
Mythological Criticism in Adventures	Anupam Chakrabarty	47	of Huckleberry Finn
Environmentalism and Eco-teaching	Vineet Mehta	54	
Formalism in <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	Suta Kumari	58	
Translated Poems of Kulbhushan Kushal	N K Neb	65	
A Confession (A Peom)	Vanila	66	
Apocalyptic Future and the End of Atwood's <i>Oryx and Crake</i>	Jasleen Kaur Nanda	67	Technology Vis-à-vis
Walking down the Lane of History: A Study Chandra	Nakul Kundra	77	of Nationalism in Bankim Chatterjee's <i>Anandamath</i> and Rabindranath Tagore's <i>Gora</i>
Nature-Culture Interface in Edward Abbey's	Ambika Bhalla	85	Fire on the Mountain
Quest for Self in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's	Manpreet Kaur	92	Poem "Self-Knowledge"
	Expression of Postmodern Condition and		
Modernist Concerns in the Poetry of	N.K.Neb	97	Kulbhushan Kushal
Death as an Existential Concern in Shashi	Savita Rani	105	
Deshpande's <i>The Binding Vine</i>			
An Unweeded Garden : A Review	N K Neb	109	

## Speech in Silence in Shashi Deshpande's

## *That Long Silence*

*Dr. Tanvir Sachdev\**

The question of identity, a sense of self or subjectivity, women's silence built into structures of oppression and a struggle for feminist space are issues which are crucial to feminist discourse. Deshpande as a woman writing in English and publishing both in India and the West is deeply conscious of these issues. According to Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan to "write self-consciously and pragmatically as a woman is to be preoccupied with 'feminist' themes centrally, not merely incidentally" (Rajan 76). Deshpande gives expression to the sense of being stifled and oppressed in patriarchal casts of identity made for women. Women no longer find their false sense of halo in an iconised perfection of the past. Thus the questions of identity and self, circumscribed within the private sphere, leaving the larger issues out assumes importance. This paper focuses on Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*—a narrative of middle and upper class women, poised delicately on the threshold. It explores their silences, their need for space and the fragile sense of self or subjectivity.

Middle-class women become an important category in themselves because as Jyoti Puri says, their bodies, sexualities, and gender identities are sites where cultural notions of normality and social respectability are contested. "Collectively and individually, middle . . . class women are expected to embody national and cultural identity" (Puri 2). But while they become the repositories of nationality and culture their own sense of subjectivity is threatened by the burdens they carry. With an increased sense of being confined and stifled in their traditional roles in the private sphere as wife and mother the protagonists grope about seeking a sense of space and an identity of their own beyond all these constructs. Rajan points out that the middle-class Indian woman has generally been seen as "perennially and transcendently wife, mother and homemaker" (Real and Imagined 133). In fact,

middle-class women have been taken by mainstream Indian feminism to represent Indian womanhood — in a kind of monolithic concept—as one who is in search of an identity pulled by the contrary claims of tradition and modernity “to give shape and content to her individual existence in sexist society” (Sebastien 170). Vrinda Nabar goes so far as to say that “the middle-class worldview may be interpreted as Indian. It is one which is defined in terms of the family and community. . . . Stri-Jati had over the centuries acquired a common denominator which retained a margin-centre dialectic within its unity of experience” (Nabar 49).

Silence is an important attribute of the private sphere which is built into structures of oppression, an indictment of society which delegates women into two opposing modes — of acquiescence as well as the silence of resistance signifying protest. The injunction to be silent is taught early by cultures that have internalised patriarchal mores.

That *Long Silence* is an autobiographical narrative of Jaya, an urban, educated, middle-class housewife in Bombay. Hiding with her husband Mohan, who is facing charges of corruption, in a small suburban flat, Jaya’s normal routine is so disrupted, that for the first time she can look at life and attempt to decide who she really is. In the silence of their Dadar flat, with her children away and normal routine disrupted she plunges into an intense introspection of herself. The speaking subject ‘I’ becomes the centre of writing with the first person narrative and serves as an apt device to generalise the flow of her agonised reminiscences. Lying solitary in her room, her mind shuttles between past and present and covers the whole span of life. The ‘I’ is explored in different ways in relation to others and redefines and redistributes relationships with others. Her fractured sense of self is revealed in her attempt to be a writer thwarted by the dictates of her husband, her relationship with a friend and neighbour, Kamat and the multiple voices of other oppressed women who struggle to find expression through her.

Jaya is fixed into her role as a housewife—as a docile, subservient well-turned-out woman commensurate with her husband’s position as a well-placed, a well-paid technocrat. Playing the stereotypical role of a happy housewife, she tries to match her life with the “glossy coloured advertising visuals,” of the four of them at the meal (Deshpande\* 4). “We smiled, we laughed; I, the mother served them with ‘love and care’; Mohan the head of the family smiled indulgently, and the children polite and playful” (4). It is almost as if she were playing out her life to match the constructs of the contemporary discourse of the ‘new’ woman in India. “She is ‘new’ in the sense both of having evolved and

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## **Revisiting Thomas Gray’s Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard**

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*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is one of those few poems which, nine times out of ten, find themselves included in every anthology prescribed by the universities in our country for undergraduate students opting for English Literature. Teachers of English literature love to quote stanzas from it and students love to learn it by heart. The critics have been very kind to this poem. Alexander Pope was all praise for the expressive power of this poem even when he thought that the ideas contained in it were far from original. The *Elegy*, to quote Pope, was remarkable for having “What oft was thought but never so well expressed.” Dr Samuel Johnson, that most difficult of critics to please, could not find fault with the *Elegy* in his celebrated *Life of Gray in Lives of Poets* even when Gray’s other well known poems did not measure up to the expectations of the literary dictator. To quote Johnson, “Had Gray often written thus it would have been vain to praise and useless to blame.” He admired the *Elegy* for the universality of its ideas when he said that the poem contains “sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo.” The *Elegy* has been considered a truly democratic poem because it is about the marginalized sections of society, about the flowers that are born to blush

unseen and about gems of purest ray serene which, for want of opportunity, are condemned to lie for ever on the dark unfathomed bottom of the societal ocean.

To 'revisit' a poem having the reputation of the Elegy, with all the connotations of the word 'revisit' in the critical terminology, is to provoke the admirers of this poem to raise their hackles and to be guilty of plain blasphemy. One is not unaware of the fate of those who beg for a second look at a poem which has all along been the darling of the critics, students and teachers of English literature. The heretics are either burnt on the stake or else have to face the Inquisition neither of which is an enviable fate. Having said this, I must submit in all humility that reassessment of works of literature is a necessary and desirable part of literary criticism even if this exercise may at first seem unpleasant, even shocking, to the reader of the reassessment project.

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### **Expression of Postmodern Condition and Modernist Concerns in the Poetry of Kulbhushan Kushal**

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Postmodern thoughts can be traced in the philosophical ideas related to the theoretical perspectives of poststructuralists and the deconstructionists like Derrida in their rejection of received truths and universality of systems, stability and fixity of meaning. Similarly, Michel Foucault's challenge to universalization of ethical, moral and social values resulting in suppression and oppression of and even demonization of divergent social groups can be included in the ambit of postmodernist thought. The most influential and powerful expression of postmodernist ideology is associated with Lyotard's views concerning discredulity towards meta narratives- over arching systems of thought used to make sense of human experience. It makes disbelief in meta-narratives a major characteristic feature of postmodern condition. Another thinker whose views are extremely significant to understand the nature of postmodern condition is Baudrillard. He too rejects the notion that there are hidden structures behind all phenomena which has to be located and explained to understand reality. He rather believes that postmodern world is a world of simulacra: a world in which it is difficult to differentiate between reality and simulation. In such a situation signs represent nothing else but themselves and there is no other reality to which they represent. In the contemporary world order impacted by technology, signs have no connection to reality. In fact they seem to be more real than the real. In other words, the contemporary world order does not take recourse to established or underlying systems to make claims to truth and seek legitimation. The only legitimizing system is the performative or use value of each and every aspect of life including ideas feelings and emotions.

These aspects of postmodern scenario have also impacted our life and its understanding. People seem to have adopted a celebratory attitude towards the absence of underlying systems of values and social norms in the postmodern world order. What marks the difference between postmodern and the modernist attitudes towards life can be traced from the modernist sense of loss of the underlying systems as they gradually seem to have become irrelevant and the postmodernist celebration of disbelief towards them. In other words, for modernists, the underlying and the all inclusive systems do exist only man has turned indifferent towards them that has brought a deterioration in the value system adopted by him. On the other hand, the very idea of the existence of underlying, pre-given systems providing justification and legitimacy for human actions is not acceptable to the postmodernists. Interestingly, these two opposing tendencies often exist side by side marking the complex nature of their interaction.

The present paper is an attempt to explore how Kulbhushan Kushal while expressing the sway of postmodern world order in present day life also shows a modernist concern for values in his poetry. His poetry concentrates on the life in the postmodern scenario that the poet finds around him. At the same time it also marks a modernist sense of loss over people's indifference towards the existence of transcendental ideals. It shows that despite the immense impact of various cultural developments on Indian social life, the strain and relevance of modernist sense of order has not disappeared altogether. Consequently, Kushal's poetry provides glimpses of postmodern cultural scenario from a modernist perspective which tends to make his poetic utterances a critique of postmodern life and its understanding.

The foremost feature of postmodern understanding of life involves a challenge to the concept of stable, fixed and transcendental nature of reality, identity and ideals like truth and justice. Apart from this, postmodern reality marks a complete separation of signs from reality. Consequently, instead of the real people take the virtual for the real. Signs themselves have become more important than their meanings. It can be observed from Kushal's presentation of postmodern condition through the role that masks play as faces:

In the dance of masks  
Faces are intimate strangers  
Their smiles  
Charm us not  
Their lips  
Kiss us not ( Whirlpool of Echoes, P. 15)

In the contemporary times when the signs have lost their earlier value, faces themselves have turned into masks. Instead of being what traditionally faces used to be understood (index of mind) faces as signs no longer perform this function. Ironically, faces now seem to have turned into masks and the masks as signs of faces seem to be more real than the faces. In other words, instead of referring to some underlying meanings, faces as signs refer back to themselves. On the other hand, the masks, to use Baudrillard's terms, seem to have become more real than the real faces or what he calls hyperreal.

A related aspect of the metaphoric value awarded to masks in this poem implies postmodern image oriented and technology and mass media governed reality. Kushal highlights this aspect of life in his poem, 'Sanitized Mother'. It shows how the present day life is highly an image governed order. The images projected through television, computers and mass media have influenced people's way of thinking and perceiving the outside world in such a way that they get mesmerized by these images and hardly ever think about the reality hidden behind them. Consequently an image governed generation seems to have developed. How these developments have impacted our life in the postmodern scenario can be seen from the interaction between a child and a shopkeeper. The child in the poem prefers the virtual instead of the real mother:

I am not asking for  
The real mother  
Caressing and screaming  
Lost in affection  
With frowns and smiles  
Dancing together (Rainbow on Rocks p.38).

On the other hand the mother that the child describes as his choice is in fact an image of the mother projected in print and electronic media in different advertisements and television serials etc. This image of the mother has nothing to do with the real mother. The poet points out the nature of the image of a mother that the child takes for the real:

I want a mother  
With a smile pasted on the face

Looks moist, face angelic  
With tender hands  
Rocking the child (Rainbow on Rocks,p.38)

In this image governed life where there is no fixed meaning that the images and signs convey, even the divine and spiritual signs have lost their traditional significance. They no longer signify what they are supposed to stand for. It makes the superficial more valuable than the deeper, serious and sublime. An interesting impact of postmodern ways of the world is evident when we find certain elements like images of Gods and Goddesses used in a way that rejects the notion of fixity of meaning and the existence of some underlying framework that awards significance to human behaviour. For example, in his poem, 'Divine Brands' Kushal points out how different language games determine the significance of words and different elements of a culture. Related to their established and accepted context the pictures of divinities are worshipable and a source of spiritual upliftment. But without reference to underlying systems they lose their earlier significance, they tend to follow a different language game that uses these images as items of commerce and trade:

It is the festival of brands  
Dronacharya is back in our studios  
With all his archery stunts  
And Krishna is there  
On our pastes and panmasalas (Rainbow On Rocks)

Such developments pointed out by Kushal also bring out the shift in the paradigms of understanding informing contemporary perspectives studying culture. The mixing of the godly and the commercial marks a rejection of the inherent division between the high and low culture. In postmodernist perspective everything used to convey specific meaning for certain things is fiction and constructed. Therefore, no fiction can be considered to be better than the other. It also brings out the changed perspectives used for the study and understanding of culture expressed in the following words :

*culture is in a sense flat rather than hierarchical : it is a **horizontal field** in which different areas of interest mix, converse, cross over and sometimes fight with each other. It is not a vertical edifice in which influences and/or disagreements travel up and down between the top (art and literature) and bottom (mass or popular culture) floors."s: (Ward Glenn: 31)*

It marks a challenge to the foundationalist thoughts based on the assumption that every thing is understood and governed by some underlying systems of thought.

Another related aspect of postmodern condition that finds expression in Kushal's poetry concerns the question of human identity. In the postmodern capital governed world, human identity is not only fluid and uncertain, it subject to the complex impacts of many other practices. When the underlying systems that award meaning to life and experience are unstable and fictional in nature, how can they be used to define identity in fixed terms? Identity is now a kind of performance related to business, social and cultural context or to the gender and sexual roles. The role of capital and market oriented forces in determining and impacting human identity has been pointed out by Kushal in his poem 'Market'. In the poem the customer is confused to ascertain whether he is the one who is the consumer or he is being consumed. The life size statues, images displayed in the showrooms mesmerize him so much that he gets confused. As soon as he makes a choice it results in determining his identity in consumer terms. He is identified not as the one who produces or trades in a particular thing, but the one who consumes a specific item. Ironically, his consumption of particular goods awards him identity as a consumer at the same time consuming his identity as an individual. It brings the persona in the poem to a stage where he starts doubting whether he is the consumer or the item consumed. It ultimately results in the internalization of the process of marketing so much that the persona starts thinking in terms of market. The visit to the market at first seems charming and

everything seems to be there for the customer. By the time he realizes his situation, the market forces have already played their trick:

Markets generate million images  
Greedy collected lustily preserved  
In the chambers of our minds  
Till we start visualizing  
Our minds as market. (Songs of Silence p.41)

However, the poet points out the holes in this overpowering market strategy in the following lines: "The branded is the best \Is the cruel joke of the century" ( 48) It indicates that the brand names are also a kind of sings that people consume . Ironically enough , these sings again have no underlying reality only the sings mesmerize as reality. Therefore, life in the postmodern times tends to become image oriented instead of having any connection with underlying reality .

Apart from this, the postmodern world instead of dogmatic adherence to systems prefers a system of paralogy, in which parallel systems find relevance. It makes the postmodern world a world of impurities as no culture, pattern, framework as well social group is considered to be complete in itself. It also implies that cultural forms should welcome outside influence , though adverse, as there are no stable foundations to provide justification to the earlier cultural forms. Instead of singularity and monolithic nature of society and culture, the growth in the contemporary world witnesses multiple perspectives having their influence to the extent of altering the very nature of the otherwise treated to be stable and closed cultures. How this phenomenon is different from simple cultural exchange and development can be ascertained from Kushal's poems 'Vengeance' and 'They ' These poems point out that our earlier values, social norms, systems of behaviour etc. get easily influenced in the postmodern condition as people no longer believe in stable values. The immediate impact of these influences takes people away from their cultural moorings . The poet warns us about the consequences of such an invasion of ideas that shakes our earlier beliefs. Kushal hints at these dangers of the postmodernist ideas that have the potential to destabilize accepted and time tested values , as they come

To tamper with  
Our prayers  
Abodes of Gods  
Blessings of goddesses ( Rainbow on Rocks P. 53 )

In the same way, his poem 'They' talks about the invasion of postmodern ways :

They will sing a song  
Our visions shall be stolen  
In broad day light ( Songs of Silence p. 11)

The loss of vision here also implies complete disregard for earlier established systems used to understand life. In the postmodern scenario, when the very existence of underlying systems or values and ideals is challenged it tends to introduce anarchic elements in life.

Another postmodernist aspect of life that emerges in contemporary times and has been expressed by Kushal is related to people's unscrupulous lust for wealth,, profit and material success with no recourse to finer human feelings. In the postmodern scenario efficiency, profit and success are their own logic, legitimacy and justification. Therefore, their acceptance or value need not be judged in terms of systems involving stable values and ideals like truth, justice or love. In such a scenario, Kushal points out

The grammar of shame  
Is not a subject  
Relevant to growth and prosperity (Rainbow on Rocks p.68)

Kushal's presentation of life impacted by postmodern conditions indicates the onslaught of new cultural developments that have overpowered different forms of life. However, the poet himself does not

conform to the postmodernist view of life and nor does he seem to believe that life does not need some underlying systems to govern it. Therefore, he repeatedly expresses his dislike and disgust at human behaviour whenever it shows disregard for values. Even man's insensitive attitude towards nature and environment, ungoverned by a sense of justice and judicious use of natural resources is not acceptable to the poet. Man's exploitative attitude towards nature is the result of his unconcern for any stable values that govern human behaviour. Kushal shows his discontent about such a gross violation of values that propagate harmonious existence between man and nature. Therefore, the poet believes that human destruction in the hands of nature in the form of floods is the result of man's own doings.

The floods are here again  
To remind us  
How our anarchy has robbed  
The peace of the earth  
And how our ears have stopped  
Listening to the music  
Of water, fire, earth  
Ether and wind (Rainbow on Rocks P. 59)

Such a concern for nature also implies the poet's rejection of the postmodernist developments. When he finds that people impacted by new developments have turned insensitive and think of making profit and gains only, he speaks of the kind of life it is going to generate:

With dwarfed souls  
And huge bodies  
Shall they rule  
The mother Earth  
Unhinged is my memory  
And near broken my heart (Rainbow on Rocks)

And the people who come into contact with this kind of life will naturally be devoid of human kindness, love, sympathy, emotions and fellow feelings. The conditions prevailing in the capital oriented society have already turned human beings into petty traders, talking of counts and discounts, negotiations and strategies (all terms related to business and commerce). In such a scenario, Kushal believes,

No wonder  
With trade barometers in our hands  
We measure the beat of relation pulse  
Swing of status sensex  
Truth is abominable  
In times out of joint ( Whirlpool of Echoes p. 20)

His criticism of postmodern conditions becomes more pronounced when he says :  
With devilish shine of jewellery  
The embellishments of a prostitute  
Are no substitute  
For simple, chaste intimations of love  
(Whirlpool of Echoes p.21)

Kushal's constant expression of the view challenging postmodernist thought reveal that his poetry, no doubt, brings out the implications of the postmodernist thought and the life impacted by recent developments. However, he himself has a firm belief that values do exist and provide meaning to life. He provides expression to postmodern conditions in life but from a modernist perspective.

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