

# Family and Female Paralysis : Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

---

MALA RENGANATHAN

Shashi Deshpande once said:

Ask any woman 'do you believe in gender equality?' and she may retort 'what's that?'. But ask her instead - 'do you think your daughter is a lesser human being, that she should not be educated, should be married early, to anyone, at any price, that she should have nothing in her life apart from her family and home and should stay within the family at all costs, even if it is to suffer or die, getting no support from you once she gets married' - will she say 'yes'? Or will it be a 'no'? But why do I say 'she'? Most men, I have no doubt, will say 'no' too. A world without frightened, dependent, trapped, frustrated women is a better world for all of us to live in....' (Deshpande's talk "The Indian Woman – Stereotypes, Images and Realities")

Shashi Deshpande's writings project the world of women trapped in their familial, cultural and social roles. In several of her novels, Shashi Deshpande has depicted the dilemma of the Indian women and has sought solutions to their problems by looking at them from intellectually newer perspectives. Deshpande questions the cultural/ social 'framing up' of women into museum pieces and encourages women to fight against such traditional traps that obstruct the achievement of their emancipation. Family, to Deshpande, is an important institution responsible for the predicament of the woman.

---

*Paper presented at the Fulbright -SCILET Seminar held on June 25, 2002 at SCILET, Madurai.*

More than any other institution, the family has perpetuated the subjugation of women, fixed their place and their roles within it so definitely that it seems almost like a sacred law, the infringement of which requires more courage than most women possess. One has to admit, sorrowfully, that in our country the family has been an instrument used to keep women in their place, to crush individual aspirations. (Shashi Deshpande "Happy Families? - The family as a museum piece")

*That Long Silence*, the Sahitya Akademy award winning novel of Shashi Deshpande also holds family as a system responsible for the woman's backwardness in the society. It is a psychological novel that explores the psyche of a woman torn between the traditional roles prescribed to her by the patriarchal family system and the autonomous role that her feminist individuality aspires for. The text sifts the monotonous anatomizing female consciousness of the protagonist, Jaya, and whisks through the conglomerous twilight of past events into a single statement of the female suffocation, remorse and longing for an escape that is transitory. This essay views an individualistic woman's alienation and paralysis of the self in the context of an oppressive, female-corrosive system which family system imposes and reproduces in India.

The story of *That Long Silence* in a nutshell: Jaya returns along with her husband Mohan to her maternal ancestral house in Ambegaon, for a temporary refuge against the danger of punishment which Mohan faces in his job due to some malpractice he has committed. The temporary stay in Ambegaon away from the daily routine seems to make Mohan restless. Nevertheless for Jaya, the transitory home provides space for an Eliotian kind of homecoming leading her to an eerie family reunion and to her subconscious enactment of the drama of the past events, both pleasant and unpleasant, linked to her natal family members. The physi-

