

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

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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.

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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-

cal exile, forced on her due to circumstances, leads Jaya into a subconscious exile, where past memories seep into her consciousness and help her to view her predicament objectively. The quiet repose helps her to view her past in a new light. Her emotional attachment to her father; her fear of death and its disastrous consequences; her hatred for her mother and maternal authority; her relationship with her brothers, her children and most significantly her husband; her fear of failure as a wife, mother and writer; her emerging individuality; her awareness of her suppressed self and the desire for freedom from it – all these, she is now able to confront and accept them as realities she cannot escape from. The novel ends with her final resolution to try and bring some change, even though change seems painful and difficult to bring about. The novel ends on a positive note from the female protagonist, that “life has always to be made possible”, even amidst its reality of impossibilities (Silence 193).

I am of the opinion that family system is the cause of the subordination of women in the Indian society. While family gives protection to the woman at some level, it also restricts her physically and mentally by imposing certain unwritten cultural codes. All ethical rules and principles preached by our elders stress the need for confining women within the bounds of family system. Ideals of womanhood and motherhood, modeled on Manu's principles, propose that woman needs to be protected by the father in her girlhood, by the brother and her husband in her adulthood and by her son in her old age and widowhood. However man's protection of woman does not mean that woman is free from all other responsibilities. On the contrary, family system heavily depends on the woman's labor and energy for its nourishment. It is basically the responsibility of women to take care of house and children. Not only the traditional illiterate woman, but also the educated and employed woman is not liberated from the burden of familial labor and responsibilities. The family system imprisons woman and conditions her free-

dom of choice and restricts her profession. Like a tethered cow she has to move within a confined circumference and pretend to be free and satisfied. Such a pretended freedom or satisfaction only leads her to a mental vacuum and leaves her with a taste of bitterness and existential dilemmas. Shashi Deshpande has represented the predicaments of such a woman in her novel, *That Long Silence*. The novel represents how the decadent beliefs and value systems in the Indian family affect the woman and paralyze her capacities to play a conscious role as an individual in the society.

Shashi Deshpande's heroine Jaya in *That Long Silence*, grows up like any other middle class woman, amidst the traditional Indian familial milieu, familiarizing family homilies like "A husband is like a sheltering tree" (*Silence* 137). However, because of her father's liberal influence, Jaya develops a different kind of attitude towards life. While the other girls were performing pujas and coming to school with turmeric-dyed threads round their wrists and had asked for nothing more than the destiny of being wives and mothers, Jaya entertained dreams of going to Oxford and winning Chatfield Prize or Ellis Prize (*Silence* 36). But her dreams get shattered with her father's early death and she agrees to marry out of compulsion to escape the detestable family now devoid of her father. But the escape route in the form of marriage turns out to be a trap. For her husband, Mohan is certainly not unconventional like her father. Mohan, like any other 'normal' husband in a patriarchal system, expects familial role from his working wife. The family makes too many social demands on Jaya, that she virtually gets caught in the vicious cycle of fulfilling social expectations at the cost of her independent self – a self that wishes ardently to be free from the drudgery of household business and to pursue a literary career as a feminist writer. The resulting stagnation and paralysis kill her spontaneity, self-confidence and identity.

Jaya finds out that the first casualty of the marriage was

her identity. Jaya realizes that being a woman, it is her duty to mould her identity according to the wishes of her husband. When Mohan christens her as "Suhasini" expecting her to discard her original name "Jaya," Jaya, for sometime, flits between the two linguistic identities, desperately trying to mould herself into her new identity

And I was Jaya. But I had been Suhasini as well. I can see her now, the Suhasini, who was distinct from Jaya, a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped. (*Silence* 15-6).

Thus family fixes the woman in the trap of dual identity, with the real woman caught somewhere between the two.

Deshpande's *That Long Silence* point to how family as a system creates a hierarchical relationship between the male and the female and delegates a more difficult, strenuous and monotonous responsibility like homemaking and child rearing to the woman. Consequently men expect services from women as their right. For example, Jaya realizes that there is no qualitative difference between her authoritarian father-in-law, who fumes at his wife and throws the food plate on the wall for not making fresh chutney, and her soft-spoken husband, who retorts, "You want me to cook?" when Jaya asks him to help when she was pregnant. Men distance themselves from 'womanly' activities like cooking, cleaning, washing, child-rearing etc and expect women to undertake such strenuous and monotonous work. Jaya realizes that education and employment automatically do not bring any change in the gender-based division of work within the families. She understands that as Mohan's wife, it is her responsibility to maintain or repair his clothes and she can be rebuked by her sisters-in-law, if not by husband, for not discharging these functions. Like an obedient wife, Jaya performs all these functions, despite her dislike for them and also at the cost of her profession. But there was always a

part in her, which rebels against the imposition of such roles. Jaya becomes aware of this rebelling self in her, when she reads her past diaries: "reading through the entries, I could feel her dwindling, the woman who had lived this life." She further adds,

"...the agonized cries – 'I can't cope, I can't manage, I can't go on' – had been neatly smothered. As also – the question that had confronted me everyday – 'Is this all?' The biggest question facing the woman of these diaries had been: what shall I make for breakfast/lunch/tea/dinner? That had been the *leit motif* of my life" (*Silence* 70).

During her temporary stay in Ambegaon, freed from her drudgery "of all those monsters that had ruled my life, gadgets that had to be kept in order, the glassware that had to sparkle, the furniture and curios that had to be kept spotless and dust-free, and those clothes, God, all those never-ending piles of clothes that had to be washed and ironed, so that they could be worn and washed and ironed once again." (*Silence* 25), she realizes that the only person who came to her rescue from the monotonous household work was her low paid maidservant. The only way out of this drudgery is but to depend on the poverty of the laboring class of women. As Jaya puts it,

"All those happy women with husbands in good jobs, men who didn't drink and beat their wives, those fortunate women whose kitchen shelves gleamed with brass and stainless steel vessels – they were of no use to me. It was Jeeja [her servant] and her like I needed, it was these women who saved me from the hell of drudgery. Any little freedom I had depended on them" (*Silence* 52)

All the efforts and labor that the women have put in to build 'happy families', however, go unnoticed and un-rewarded.

That, despite all their services and sacrifices, women do not get any recognition for their work becomes clear to Jaya, when she finds that none of the female members of her family appear in the family tree created by her uncle. Such an unpaid and unrecognized work of woman ties her life into a narrow familial groove and annihilates her personality. It imposes several restrictions on woman performing her role as a public person. Jaya, who uses limited space available to her to get recognition as a writer, realizes that patriarchy controls and conditions her role in the public sphere. Jaya's aim to preserve her marriage at all costs and avoid anything that poses danger to her family life, affects her career as a writer. Instead of giving words to the feminist spirit latent in her, she starts writing the 'Seetha' serial, the story of an ideal woman, just to avoid hurting her husband Mohan, who is afraid that if Jaya writes a realistic piece, the people might think that the 'man' in the story was himself. As Jaya puts it, "To Mohan, I had been no writer, only an exhibitionist." (144). It enhances his prestige to have a writer as wife. But he is never sympathetic to the ideas that Jaya wanted to portray in her writings. It is interesting to note that Mohan never used force to make Jaya fall in line with her thinking. Emotional blackmailing is enough to tether woman to her confines. Jaya herself admits:

"Perhaps, if Mohan had been angry, if he had shouted and raged at me, if he had forbidden me to write, perhaps I would have fought him and gone on. But he had only shown me his hurt. And I had not been able to counter that. I had relinquished them instead, all those stories that had been taking shape in me because I had been scared – scared of hurting Mohan, scared of jeopardizing the only career I had, my marriage." (*Silence* 144).

In the families, where marriage becomes a career to be pursued, there is no love or spontaneity in human relationships.

Jaya herself realizes that what attracts her husband towards her is her body, not her soul. He is happy that "you haven't put on any weight. Most women get shapeless at your age. You're still the way you were when we got married" (*Silence* 85). But physical relationship devoid of love becomes monotonous and disgusting. Their lovemaking is no longer an event to be looked forward to, as it is part of their shadowy world of silence. Hence Jaya says,

"... when we got into bed and the lights were off, there would be caresses. And kisses. And then lovemaking, a silent, wordless lovemaking. God, how terrible it was to know a man so well. I could time it, almost to the second, from the process of our lovemaking, from the first devious wooing to the moment he turned away from me, offering me his hunched back." (*Silence* 85).

The woman's alienation from her self leads to the paralysis of the woman's social life. But more than the social and cultural paralysis of the woman, it is her sexual paralysis i.e., stasis in her marital life, that knolls the death toll to her independent self. For the real paralysis that the female protagonist encounters is something to do with the stagnation that sets in the male-female relationship, which is curtailed by cultural practices. In such a situation, stasis and stagnation develop automatically. As a result, in *That Long Silence*, Jaya's relationship with her husband is dominated by sex without love. Even sex becomes the facet of the monotonous and routine silence between the couple. Their lovemaking is no longer an event to be looked forward to, as it is part of their dark world of terrors.

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is a novel about the Indian woman's social paralysis symbolized by her silence. It also focuses on the woman's silence resulting from her adhering to the Indian values handed over to her through the ideals of Sita, Savitri or Gandhari. It is the silence of the

woman across the ages, the silence that symbolizes woman's resigned acceptance of her familial/social/cultural status. It is the silence of a person alienated from her self. It is 'that long silence' that needs to be broken in order to recover from the female stasis. Jaya, the protagonist in the novel, goes through the experiences of a contemporary Indian woman caught between domestic role and public responsibility. Despite her education and career, she falls in line with the patriarchal expectations of her husband and relatives and suppresses the 'self' in her for saving her marriage at any cost. Like other women, she also learns to wait.

"Wait until you get married. Wait until your husband comes. Wait until you go to your in-laws' home. Wait until you have kids." Yes, ever since I got married I had done nothing but wait. Waiting for Mohan to come home, waiting for the children to be born, for them to start school, waiting for them to come home, waiting for the milk, the servant, the lunch-carrier man..." (30).

The hectic and monotonous responsibilities that she had to shoulder never gave her time to introspect what she has been doing all the years. But her temporary refuge in Ambegaon gives her time to reflect on all that has happened to her since marriage. While reading her past diaries, she becomes aware of her suppressed individuality. She also realizes that in performing her familial duties, she has alienated herself from her individual self. In other words, she realizes that she has started speaking Prakrit, instead of Sanskrit, like the women characters in Sanskrit drama. This realization makes Jaya take a vow to break her silence. By making Jaya take such a decision, Shashi Deshpande gives vent to the voices of millions of Indian women suppressed by patriarchal family structures and practices. To conclude the Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* centers the woman's awareness of and the struggle against hierarchy, gender discrimination and

male domination inherent in the patriarchal family structures

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