

Balancing Tradition and Modernity: Changing the Image of Woman in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence*

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Abstract – India has always been rich in its tradition and culture. Indian traditional values give it a unique and different recognition all around the world. It has always attracted western countries and at the same time it has also got affected by the western culture. The westernization of Indian culture gave birth to modernity and now tradition and modernity have become two sides of the same coin. Our tradition offers numerous instances of the spirit of free and critical inquiry of the highest intellectual order and determination to pursue truth. In fact, individuals and cultures derive a lot from their past, mingle it with the experiences of the present and make necessary changes for better future. Change is the part of life and life is a continuous play of two things: a desire for change, as well as the need for the familiar and the unknown. All societies have their own tradition but when we talk about 'traditional societies', it refers to a specific historical phase of social and cultural development. Tradition is constituted by the beliefs, values, aesthetic, and ways of life, which maintain continuity with the past. Traditional values are passed down from one generation to the next generation without much change. They are the collective wisdom and modes of behaviour of the ancestors, cherished and observed by the present generation. Modernity as opposed to tradition refers an outlook that is generally future oriented and forward looking. Modernization consists of urbanization, industrialization, education, technology, wealth, and diverse occupational opportunities which bring with them a whole new outlook on life, a new system of beliefs, patterns of thoughts. In this fast changing society we witness to many changes from time to time and the clever thing to do is to convert these changes into opportunities.

Shashi Deshpande maintains a unique position among the contemporary Indian writers in English. She has a penetrating eye for the fast changing Indian society. She pays much attention to the recent phenomenon of the educated professional woman and her adjustment or maladjustment in the family. Her novels are concerned with the theme of tradition and modernity, an exploration into the female psyche. She has very well portrayed modern, educated and career-oriented middle-class women, who are sensitive to the changing time and situation and shows great balance between family and profession. In this paper I have tried to study Shashi Deshpande's novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence* in terms of how her women characters respond to the phenomena of change. Their journey charts, their inner conflict and the balance they maintain between tradition and modernity, in their search for identity, independence, fulfillment, and love in their life.

Keywords- Tradition, Modernity, Balance, self-Identity, Changing Image.

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The word 'Tradition' is defined in Webster's dictionary as, "The handing down of opinions, doctrines, practices, rites and customs from ancestors to posterity by oral communication." Etymologically the English word 'Tradition' comes from the Latin noun *Tradition*, whose verb from *Traderere* means 'to transmit or to hand over for safe keeping.' It signifies the knowledge of the past handed down orally through succeeding generations. On the other hand, modernity has a connection to the new and contemporary, sense of 'present or recent times'. Modernity is about living with contradictions and filtrate the old into the new. Our

society is neither fully traditional nor it is fully modern. It is actually passing through a transitional phase. If we talk about the present situation, we find that India is still a country struggling in with the duality of the tradition and modernity. The old generation is following tradition and expects the same from the new generation. But at the same time the new generation which is highly educated and technical in its lifestyle and thoughts, feels suffocated in the old traditional values. Youngsters find it difficult as their modern lifestyle does not allow them to follow tradition but at the same time they cannot afford to leave it completely. In fact, a

balance between these two is the requirement of time and Indian society. Tradition always has a very strong hold over us. Its influences can be seen in our everyday life. We have entered in twenty first century but still the norms, ceremonies and rituals regarding birth, death and marriage are strictly observed. Education has no doubt brought awareness and a scientific temper among people, developed the sense of rationale but it has not caused a total erasure of tradition modes of living and thinking. There are some good and bad things about tradition and modernity. Indian tradition bound society welcomes the birth of a baby boy and feels sad or distressed on the birth of a girl. Children are brought up in such an atmosphere that they also accept tradition as an inseparable part of life. Boys are taught to be strong, responsible, and to be future head of the family. On the other hand girls are trained in the household work and groomed with certain type of behavior which defines them as idealistic daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law and mother.

We live in a country which is still rooted in its tradition and culture; it would be impractical to expect change overnight. In present time, the shift from old to new or from tradition to modern has become more difficult for Indian women. They are left confused between the opposing forces of tradition and modernity. It is difficult for them to reconcile their personal aspirations and their duties towards their family and society. For women, it requires more courage to challenge these traditional roles and duties, because they are more bound to these traditions than men. Shashi Deshpande is one of those novelists who have shown the dilemma of modern educated, working women who play their traditional roles with full dedication. She is very much aware of the subordinate and secondary status of the Indian women who feel trapped in customs and traditions. She explores woman's situation in which she is standing between tradition and modernity and try to balance it. We cannot deny the fact that tradition is a part of our past and present life but it is also true that we will have to change according to time. Through her portrayal of the Indian middle-class women's existence in India, Shashi Deshpande not only present a feminist insight into patriarchal values, but also prescribes balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for the contemporary woman. Sudden jump to modernity, according to Deshpande may be harmful to the Indian women because of deep rooted culture and civilization. She does not regard all tradition as bad and harmful. She focuses on the fact that tradition plays a vital role in individual's development and in the development of society because it decides the path and place of the progress of society. To her, tradition has the values of security and harmony that symbolizes the Indian way of life. Modernity to her is the assertion of independence, individual identity. Deshpande's protagonists display a tangible

development during the course of the novel. They go through a process of self-examination before they reach self-actualization. They are living in a traditional society and following its customs, but at the same time they are equally aware of social and cultural inequalities to which they are subjected. They are standing on the cross roads of tradition and modernity. They want change within traditional and cultural norms, they do not want to reinterpret them, but merely make them alive with dignity and self-respect. Deshpande has been successful in creating strong women protagonists who refuse to get crushed under the weight of their personal tragedies, and face life with great courage and strength. Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* represents the growing seed of modernity, while her mother and her husband Manohar represent tradition and custom, and those values and norms established by a patriarchal society. Saru was born in traditional Brahmin family of South Indian city, her parents brought up her in an orthodox way. Her mother is very rigid about the Brahminical rituals and rites. Born and brought up in a conventional family, Saru's mother had learnt to blindly follow the traditions made by the society. She steps into the role of the head of the family who imposes on her the traditions of a patriarchal society. All the time she forces Saru to follow tradition and custom and make a list of do's and don'ts for her like what she should wear, her looks and her study field. Saru rebels against the traditions without realizing that unconsciously she will be compelled to play the same role which she detests. When Saru's mother knows about Saru's marriage plan with Manohar, she asks Saru about Manohar's caste.

What caste is he?

I don't know.

A Brahmin?

Of course not.

Then, cruelly...his father keeps a cycle shop.

Oh, so they are low-caste people, are they? (DHNT 96)

She is surprised to know that Manohar belongs to low caste he is not a Brahmin. She does not like Saru's decision to choose Manohar as her husband. Her typical question shows deep rooted orthodox attitude. According to the tradition in Indian marriages, the bride and groom are should be the same caste and thus, she is surprised to know that Saru has decided to marry a non-Brahmin. Saru revolts against her parents and runs away from home to get married a person of her choice. After marriage Saru becomes a successful and reputed doctor. She remains busy with patients which upsets her family life. In reality, the working

house wife is doubly burdened with duties both at home front and work place. If by chance the balance is not maintained well, then the feelings of disenchantment and imbalance leads to separation and all the relations uprooted making it a psychological problem. Manu is uncomfortable with Saru's steady rise in status, as he feels ignored when people greet and pay attention to her. Sarita's life has turned out to be a problematic one. When she comes to her father's house after a long time and thinks about her journey she realizes the fact that the home and parents are not the refuge but she is her own refuge. This understanding of reality makes Sarita see the whole world around her in a distinct form. She gets new strength which make her achieve completeness, help her to make balance between tradition and modernity and overcome her identity crisis. Sarita, who had once tried to run away from this self who caused pain to her, leaves the house as a doctor to attend to the sickness of a child, calling her father to receive Manu if he comes and tell him to wait. In this aspect, Sarita represents the middle class working women in modern India. She rebels against the traditions but ultimately tries to balance with the existing reality. She is no longer hesitant to face her life. She realizes that escapism is never a solution. Her reunion with her husband is not her submission or defeat but her new confidence to confront reality. Thus, she achieves freedom and harmony in life without compromising on her obligations and responsibilities. How traditions and beliefs can put their impact on relationships between parents and children, brother and sister, husband and wife? Here Shashi Deshpande wonderfully explores the journey of the protagonist from rejection of traditions and attraction to modernity to her acceptance of both at the balanced level. Deshpande has tried to show how a person can walk on the path of modernity by holding on to the tradition which supports life. The novel does not limit itself to woman's predicament and woman's quest for identity and space as an individual but it also shows balance between tradition and modernity and how it impacts on human relationship within the family. Deshpande has wonderfully conveyed that life is not pure rejection or acceptance but it is integration of both. The message which Deshpande finally conveys is that woman's emancipation lies neither in suffering quietly nor in repudiating all claims of the family and society like a rebel. She must draw upon her inner strength, which her education and knowledge has given her and bring about reconciliation between tradition and modernity without losing her own identity.

Jaya in *That Long Silence* is a modern, convent-educated, fluent-English speaking woman and a creative writer who symbolizes the emerging new woman conscious of her status in the society. In the novel's starting, Jaya looks very happy with her husband Mohan, who is an engineer and her two children Rahul and Rati. She seems to have almost nothing to ask for in life. But the reality reveals slowly

and Jaya is frustrated due to her lack of closeness with her husband. Despite her marriage with Mohan and subsequently becoming a mother of two children Jaya feels lonely. Shashi Deshpande uses a beautiful image to describe Jaya's married life:

A pair of bullocks yoked together...a clever phrase, but can it substitute for the reality? A man and a woman married for seventeen years. A couple with two children. A family somewhat like the one caught and preserved for posterity by the advertising visuals I so loved. But the reality was only this. We were two persons. A man. A woman. (TLS8)

Her husband is unable to understand her feelings and there is hardly any communication- verbal or emotional between both of them. Whenever Jaya tries to reveal her need for emotional security, Mohan responds sexually. Due to the traditional being of mind, Mohan is unable to differentiate between the sex and emotional satisfaction. An engineer by profession, Mohan's concern is basically with the external markers of happiness- such as money, material comforts and status. He marries to Jaya only for his social betterment. Deshpande through the character of Jaya shows the ambivalent position of contemporary educated women in India, who cannot reconcile themselves to a new situation when their husbands ignore them and crush their ambition in life. In Indian Tradition a woman doesn't have an identity of her own. Before marriage she is known by her father's name and after marriage known by her husband's name. It is very common in India that a husband can change the whole identity of a woman by changing her name, in this novel Mohan changes Jaya's name and give her new name. Shashi Deshpande presents this traditional attitude through the character of Jaya, who is known by two names: Jaya and Suhasini. In Indian Society, marriage is viewed as the ultimate aim of a woman's life infect the most powerful and effective institution of controlling and deciding the course of a woman's life. To get married and produce children and raise a family is considered to be the sole purpose of a woman's existence. According to Indian tradition when a girl leaves her home after getting married, her parents advise her to be always good to her husband and she, at all times, tries her best to follow their advice. Same thing happened with Jaya. Her Dada advised her when she was leaving Ambegaon after her marriage, "Be good to Mohan, Jaya," (138) Vanitamami used an enveloping smile to drive home the sanctity of a husband: "A husband is like a sheltering tree" (137). Ramukaka had said, "Remember, Jaya the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you" (138). But Jaya had not been told a word about what to do when a marriage was over. The imbalance that Jaya feels in their relation is inevitable. This is a common experience for many women in the contemporary society but the fear of society stops them to come out openly and complain. The

society holds a woman responsible for any cleavage in relationship and such women are taken as 'queer' or different. Jaya do not want to be different so try to make a balance between tradition and modernity which is the demand of contemporary society.

In patriarchal society, women are literally forced into a state of slavery in the name of the tradition of virtue of obedience. Mohan tells Jaya about his mother who is a traditional woman, a dutiful wife who never eats before his father and never raise her voice. He quotes his mother's silent suffering in spite of his father's harassment as strength while Jaya considers it a misery. He says "My mother never raised her voice against my father, however badly he behaved to her" (83). He expects the same response from Jaya. Realizing Mohan's typical expectation to follow the traditional pattern, Jaya moulds herself accordingly. She has learnt to control her anger and behaves like a dutiful wife who is terrified of her husband's disapproval. In order to keep up their relationship smooth, Jaya changes herself entirely and also sacrificed her talent as a serious writer. Just to prove herself a loyal wife and a caring mother, she hides her real self. This is what every Indian woman is expected to do. For Jaya it is more important to be a good wife and good mother than being a good writer. For a long period of time, Jaya manages to remain silent and suppress her feelings, thinking that her life is completely centered round her family, her home and nothing more. She realizes the fact only when she is caught in the midst of domestic storm. Mohan's going away stuns her and awakens her to her real place in life. Now Jaya analyses her life through the process of thinking and wiring down her thoughts. Jaya realizes how she has wasted the most valuable time of life in arranging and re-arranging things. Jaya's discovery of herself takes place within the structure of marriage, family and home. As Usha Tambe remarks:

The confused and clumsy Jaya appears a contrast to the smiling, efficient housewife Suhasini. But finally come to grips with herself and realizes that her total personality will have to co-ordinate both of them and that fragmentation self is not possible. (127)

Jaya thinks of her past and tries to analyse herself and her situation in life. Jaya stands for revolt against oppressing social customs that suppress women in our society. Through the process of reliving the past in her mind, Jaya gets the guidance for future. She breaks self-imposed prison wall of mind and chooses to remain in family and at the same time comes out of confining slots allotted to her by the patriarchal society. She looks for happiness and self-fulfillment within the family itself. She realizes that in order to attain selfhood a woman must transcend silence, negation and self-alienation and must have a balance in her life. Shashi Deshpande says, women should accept their own responsibility for what they are. Jaya finds that her very compromise shatters

her individuality and she too contributed to her victimization. She decides that she will live now onwards without sacrificing her identity or individuality and will try to make a balance between tradition and modernity. Jaya's decision to have her own way gives a new confidence to her and this confidence brings her emancipation. According to her a woman's relations with her family must developed within the totality of her life as a woman, only then it can lead to a harmonious fulfillment. A new Jaya is born from out of an agonizing and despairing Jaya. She pledges to live a "whole." Jaya decides that she will live her life without sacrificing her identity or individuality. She will make adjustment but it will not be a servile one.

Deshpande is very aptly puts forth her idea of the 'new woman', a woman with a refreshed identity. Her 'new woman' dares to question and challenge the age old traditions. She raised her voice against the inequalities including issues as unequal wages for women, and restriction women from labor. She is taking strides, though very slow but it is leading her towards the attainment of selfhood and dignity. Education and economic independence fill the new woman with confidence that make to face the world boldly. The modern woman passes through the process the transformation which signifies a change. She presents the new image of the Indian woman, who wants to be a wife, mother and daughter and simultaneously desire to achieve her individuality. In her current world, she is a multifaceted individual capable of playing any role but what she needs is strong mind and a strong will. She just needs to wake up and realize her worth infinite capacities to reach as high as she wants to. Women these days are no longer the weaker sex. If one looks at social, political and economic trends, women are evolving as the strong sex. Her identity is no longer seen in terms of identity of her male counterpart. Thus new woman passes through the process of transformation which signifies a change from bondage to freedom and self-ascertain. Deshpande makes it clear that woman's life is her own and she must develop the thinking that she is an individual; not a dependent but a being capable of withstanding trials in life alone. A woman being independent is about being her own self.

The realization that is achieved through this study is that the predominant issues in these novels arise from the situation that focus on women caught in a traditional society where the shift taking place from traditional to modern. Deshpande has given more importance to family relationship and how women have responded to tradition in the period of socio-economic changes, that is operating within the parameters set by the society of her time which is brilliantly pictured. Shiddharth Sharma says that; "Shashi Deshpande prescribes a balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for

contemporary women" (111). Shashi Deshpande not being an outright feminist highlights quite revolutionary ideas about the representation of female voice and quest for their identity. She also wisely stresses the dire need for becoming constructive and gain individuality and better existence in this contemporary world. Deshpande wants women to understand that it is in their own hands to fight oppression and safeguard their individuality. If they do not find a way out, nobody else would. If urban educated women are caught in concentric circles of tradition and modernity, they also have potential to bring positive changes for coming out of it. Saru and Jaya understand this and succeed in restoring their harmony as O.P. Bhatnagar remarks: "Shashi Deshpande makes her heroine choose security through reconciliation. The ethos in the novel is neither of victory or defeat but of harmony and understanding between two opposing ideas and conflicting themselves. That is quite representative of the basic Indian attitude." (5) Deshpande's protagonists finally try their best to confirm to their races, and the novels end with an optimistic note suggesting the possibility of some positive change in future. For instance, Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* waits for her husband to come to take her back and give a fresh start to their life; and Jaya in *That Long Silence* interprets Mohan's letter in positive terms and hopes for the better.

Shashi Deshpande successfully maintains a balance between tradition and modernity where the main concern is the urge to find one, to create space for oneself and to grow on one's own. She feels that women should be allowed to utilize their talents and at the same time they should fulfill their duties towards their families. When we analyze both the novels, we realize that the heroines to be in a state of confusion between tradition and modernity at the beginning but slowly as the novels unfold they go through a process of introspection, self-analysis and self-realization. At the end, they emerge as more confident, more hopeful, more stable, and realize that 'walking out' does not solve their problem. Her women have an optimistic attitude towards life and hence solve the predicament of their lives with a hope for a better future. Deshpande does not believe in offering readymade solutions. But the conviction; 'we can always hope' and 'life has always to be made possible' (TLS 193), speaks of a genuine positive attitude towards life. The concluding lines in *That Long Silence*, epitomizes the whole meaning of the life:

We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible. (TLS 193)

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