



CONFLICT BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS

(That Long Silence, The Dark Holds No Terrors, Roots and Shadows & A Matter of Time)

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ABSTRACT

The term 'tradition' is a comprehensive one and it includes all social conventions, cultural practices, religious faiths, familial and familiar relationships. The consistent burden of traditional authority has generated a rebellion against the organized forces of oppression and injustice to women. Through her novels, Shashi Deshpande promotes the idea that women must try to come out of their suppressed roles. Shashi 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. My paper analyses the conflict of tradition and modernity with special reference to the novels of Deshpande, *That Long Silence, The Dark Holds No Terrors, Roots and Shadows and A Matter of Time* respectively.

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Deshpande's women are role models of the new society who thirst for modernity, elevation and upgradation. Her modern women protagonists are assertive with individuality and quest for self identity in the male dominated society. Caught between tradition and modernity, her protagonists search for their individuality within married life. Shashi states that she does not "believe in a simple opposition of

bad bad men and good good women. I don't believe the world is like", that at all". (Holmstrom. 22).

Deshpande does not regard all traditions as bad and harmful. To her, traditions have the values of harmony and co-existence that symbolize the Indian way of life. Modernity to her is the assertion of independent individual identity. Keeping in view the long standing traditions of Indian society, she seeks solution to the problem by changing mind set



of the men folk towards the women. The world of men, now is in a process of women thinking. It cannot be changed without changing Man's way of thinking. Siddhartha Sharma comments on the novels of Shashi Deshpande thus:

She has constructed motifs of patriarchy and oppression by employing the method of negation and affirmation. Her protagonists are victims of Indian patriarchy and her initial submission resists the oppressive situation, thereby reflecting the author's view that a woman must assert herself within marriage to preserve her individuality (111).

Shashi Deshpande, one of the distinguished contemporary women writers of India, was born in 1938 in Dharwad, Karnataka. She was the second daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar Adya Ranga Charya (Sri Ranga). She studied in Dharwad in Karnataka and at the age of fifteen she went to Bombay, where she graduated in Economics and worked for a couple of months as a journalist for the magazine *on Looker*. She published her first collection of short stories in 1978, and her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* in 1980. She won the *Sahitya Akademi Award* for her novel *That Long Silence* in 1990. She won *Padma Shri award* in 2009. Her novels deal with issue of modern, educated, middle class Indian women. Her novel *Roots and Shadows* won a prize for the best Indian novel of 1982-83. Her most recent novel *Shadow Play* was short listed for the *The Hindu Literary Prize* in 2014. Some of her other novels are *If I Die Today (1982)*, *Come Up and Be Dead (1983)*, *The Binding Vine (1992)*, *A Matter of Time (1996)* *Small Remedies (2000)*, *Moving on (2004)*, *Country of Deceit (2008)*, *Ships That Pass (2012)* etc.

Shashi Deshpande holds in great worth as an Indian English woman novelist of the 21st Century. We can see the familial relationships and the burning problem of women's identity in Indian society through her novels. She is very much aware of the sub-ordinate and secondary status of the Indian women who have been caught under the customs and traditions of the ancient Indian Society. The illiteracy of the women and their weak and submissive nature and their love and affection towards

their husbands and children have thrown them into sub-graded status, as they lack strong willingness and courage to fight against the age old traditions and taboos. How to come out of tradition bound society to become a new woman is the challenge of the educated married woman. Prasanna Sree comments on Indian women thus:

The Indian woman – She is the one who is torn between tradition and modernity, she is one who is in search of self-identity, she is the one who tries to give shape and content to individual existence in a sexist society ("Conflict and Identity in Shashi Deshpande novels", 12-19).

Traditions, that teach women to behave like ideal mythical women like Sita, Sakuntala, and Savitri, tempt them to be called ideal, and prohibit them to come out of the traditional circle. Almost all novels of Deshpande narrate the story of Indian women who have been facing mental trauma and turmoil for ages. Now I choose four of her novels (as mentioned in the title) to find the conflicts of tradition and modernity in her protagonists.

"In our civilization of enduring patriarchal traditions, marital infidelity is still more serious for the woman" (Beauvoir: 610). Shashi's women at the beginning of the plot remain docile, obedient and complying with all the requests of their husbands. But gradually drift away from their spouses due to natural quarrels and conflicts. Deshpande seems to believe the sentiments of de Beauvoir who she admits has influenced her and according to whom it is women who have to define, measured and explore their special domain.

As there are estrangements between wife and husband, Deshpande's protagonists go out of their house for peace and freedom. But after careful observation and proper perception, they realize that their tyrannical husbands are better than the disgusting outside world. At the end, they understand the ways of the world, reconcile themselves to the harsh realities of life and return home with enlightenment, maturity and mellowness—the common theme in all the novels. Deshpande has a proper understanding of passionate women and the social realities.



The work of Shashi Deshpande is a verbal representation of the past and the present, East and West, tradition and modernity. She seldom writes in isolation because she endeavours to create new spaces beyond those well established conventions. While representing traditions she has tried to break the barriers of tradition which make women's lives miserable. Deshpande presents the conflict of tradition and modernity in the context of female issues of domestic nature where they are subjected to drudgery, torture and harassment.

Deshpande's Sahitya Academy award winning novel *That Long Silence* presents Jaya, the protagonist who cannot find happiness and freedom in her married life as an educated modern woman. She was invariably caught in the struggle between the traditional and the modern mode of thinking and the living. 'Jaya' the heroine in *That Long Silence* gets troubles in marriage with her husband 'Mohan'. As a writer the protagonist Jaya, got a prize for her story. But Mohan felt insulted by the story as he has to face public humiliation for revealing their personal life. Mohan behaved in such a way Jaya had to stop writing. She says, "And looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced. I had done him wrong. And I had stopped writing after that" (144). In fact Jaya never tried to make Mohan understand the difference between a fictional story and the reality.

Jaya has the feeling to be independent, but she lacks the courage to revolt against her husband, when her husband caught in the trouble due to the charge of corruption, he wants Jaya's companionship in hiding which she refuses. After a self-analysis, and examining of her own thoughts and feelings, Jaya realizes her mistakes. Finally she understands that to assert her identity saying, "But it is no longer possible for me. If I have to plug 'hole in the heart' I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us" (192). Thus Jaya comes forward and 'carve out a new identity' for herself. Her traditional role of a wife, in her conflict between tradition and modernity and her disasters that ruin her married life with Mohan and her silent suffering in the long seventeen years of married life is beautifully portrayed by the novelist.

The Dark Holds No Terrors, Shashi Deshpande's first novel, is about Saru, the protagonist

an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. She uses double narratives to give a realistic portrayal of Saru's inner self. The protagonist Saru, who attempts to free herself deals with the traumatic experience. She becomes the victim of exploitation by her own husband only because he is not ready to tolerate her as a popular doctor. But Saru tolerates her husband's torture, trouble and turmoil with herself with a sense of confidence but feels bad and disgusting inside. Manu, being a lecturer at the third grade college, creates great discomfort for her. His male ego is hurt by lower employment than his wife.

Saru cannot enjoy even mother-daughter relationship as her mother inserts gender discrimination. At the death of her brother Dhruva, mother condemns her by saying "If you are a woman, I don't want to be one" (62). Saru's marriage with Monohar is also just like Indu in *Roots and Shadows* a way to show her rebel against patriarchal traditions. As mother figures are passive and stereotypes, the daughters cannot enjoy womanhood. Same voice we can hear in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* where Mammachi the mother treats the protagonist Ammu and her brother Chako differently.

The novel *Roots and Shadows* published by Orient Longmans in 1983 has won the Thirumathi Rangammal Prize as the best Indian novel of 1983. "Roots" stands for tradition and "Shadows" signifies the marginal culture. In this novel Deshpande's protagonist Indu recalls how women are subjected to ill-treatment. She feels unhappy, repressed and restless and seeks liberation emotionally. She also bitterly recollected how crudely the idea of her womanhood was thrust upon her – her husband Naren's question as to why she always fought for her womanhood makes her think in retrospections about the day when she was first made aware of it:

My womanhood --- I had never thought of it until the knowledge had been thrust brutally, gracelessly on me the day, I had grown up. 'You're a woman now Kaki had told me. You can have babies yourself --- And I, who had all the child's unconsciousness about my own body had for the first time felt an immense hatred for it. And don't forget, she



had ended 'for four days now you are unclean. You can't touch anyone or anything'. And that had been my introduction to the beautiful world of being a woman. I was unclean – (*Roots and Shadows* 86-87).

Simone De Beauvoir holds, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman"(293) shows women are not born or made up by norms and conditions of society. They have to keep their individual identity. But in patriarchal society woman is expected to remain obedient, unquestioning and supposed to remain meek and submissive.

Mother daughter relationship has also occupied an important place in Deshpande's fiction. She does not give much credence to mother who is treated as goddess in Indian culture. She presents different facets of Mother-daughter relationship. The female protagonists of Deshpande are not representations of traditional 'Sita' images. They break out of the family mould to choose their own way of living life. All her novels deal with the women's psyche and feminine consciousness. She seems interested in highlighting secondary position occupied by women. Shashi Deshpande is very aptly puts forth her idea of the 'new woman', a woman with a refreshed identity. She struggles to transcend her restrictive traditional role to make her new woman who decides to face her husband and not runaway.

A Matter of Time is one of Shashi Deshpande's many novels to be published in New York in 1996. In this novel she depicts the theme of quest for identity. The novel portrays the story of Sumi, the protagonist. One morning, without warning Gopal, a respected Professor, walks out on his family for reasons even he cannot articulate. Sumi is shocked that she laps into complete silence. Gopal's abrupt desertion is a great cause of humiliation and mental trauma for her as it is not only a matter of great shame and disgrace but also a better realization of being unwanted. Sumi returns with her three daughters to the shelter of the Big House where her parents Kalyani and Sripati live in oppressive silence. They have not spoken to each other for thirty five years. Prasanna Sree opines:

Modern and liberal in outlook, Sumi defies the outdated social opinion and orthodox treatment of women subjected to desertion by her husband. She has the courage to fight against the problems and difficulties, humiliations and frustrations. She has the generosity to gracefully free her husband from marital bonds without venting ill-feeling (118).

Sumi, as a modern woman has ably managed the home affairs and looks after children's welfare. She is a little detached, but manages herself admirably and almost becomes self-dependent. She proves herself as a new woman of mettle and merits. In this novel Deshpande's portrayal of different generations present the world of women divided into the traditional and modern.

In the above mentioned four of Shashi Deshpande's novels the protagonists love-hate relationship symbolizes the conflict between tradition and modernity. Looking at the man-woman relationship objectively, the novelist does not blame entirely men for the subjugation of women.

Deshpande, as a writer of realism, likes to create the new atmosphere and widen the scope where the wife and husband live together happily and satisfactorily. She also likes to maintain a balance between old values of life and modern fashions coupled with individual and economic freedom. Sudden jump to modernity, according to Deshpande, may be harmful to the Indian women because of the deep-rooted culture and civilization which basically differs from that of the Western people.

Deshpande focuses on the issues regarding women struggles, rights and victories. Her 'new women' dare to question and challenge the age-old traditions. Her sole aim is to harmonize the man-woman relationship as equal partners. Her heroines are often bolder, self-reliant and rebellious. At that end they realize that 'walking out' does not solve their problems.

Deshpande women characters are unique because other women novelists like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Pravar Jabvala have portrayed this aspect of women's life without having firsthand experience of it. Unlike them, Deshpande had her



education in India and wrote about Indian women issues and real experiences. Therefore the projection of her women in her novels is authentic and credible. Shashi Deshpande has emerged as one of the main stream women writers in India today.

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