



DESHPANDE'S INTERPRETATION OF INDIAN MYTHS TO REDEFINE FEMALE IDENTITY

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Fully aware of the fact, that in the Indian Social system, myths and folklore are deep rooted in human consciousness and Indians cannot rise above these myths, Shashi Deshpande has reconstructed their significance in her short stories in contemporary context. Deshpande has borrowed anecdotes from *The Ramayana*, *The Puranas*, *Local Legends* and folklore. Realizing the myths to be part of cultural history and thus bearing deep influence on human psyche, Deshpande has explored fresh interpretation of these myths to redefine female identity.

In three of her short stories, Deshpande has related her characters to those in the *Mahabharat*, one of the greatest of Indian epics. The longest poetical composition in the world, more than 3000 years old, the *Mahabharata* contains innumerable stories in which the women had no voice. In her stories, Deshpande has lent voice to these characters, such as to Amba in 'The Inner Rooms', and to Kunti in 'Hear Me, Sanjaya' and gives them a platform to justify their actions. In her, 'The Last Enemy', Deshpande peeps into Dhuryodhan's heart who is one of the incomparable heroes of Mahabharata and provides him an opportunity to articulate his own inner turmoil at the end of the great battle of Kurukshetra.

Deshpande has strongly criticized the stereotype of women and raised a voice against those projections in the man-woman relationships in the Indian myths which were, and, even today, are damaging for the contemporary Indian woman and the health of her man-woman relationships. Deshpande criticizes thus, "To be as pure as Sita, as loyal as Draupadi, as beautiful as Laxmi, as bountiful a provider as Annapurna, as dogged in devotion as Savitri, as strong as Durga, these have become the ultimate role models for women." In her stories, 'What Has Been Decided,' 'The Last Enemy', 'Mirrors' and 'The Day of Golden Deer', Deshpande has used the man-woman relationship to throw light on those myths as well as the sensibility of those women who were compelled to tolerate the injustice of men. With this approach of hers, Deshpande has been able to achieve an unique artistic excellence and synthesize past with present to recreate an overall comprehensive philosophy of feminine consciousness. She says, "I knew that words and ideas can not mean the same to us as they mean to men because the meanings of words have been built round the interests of men. Women, we need to remember have not participated in the process of world making.

In Indian society, these great woman icons, such as Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Amba, Gandhari and so on have been quoted in various context to the contemporary woman as role models. They have always been admired and idealized for possessing ideal traits that are expected and desired in a perfect woman. Through nostalgic reminiscences, Deshpande relates the past with the present by relating myths to the experiences of the contemporary woman as closely as possible and reinterpreting them in the modern context. Moreover, Deshpande believes that the angelic halo surrounding the women from their mythical stories gets gelled in naturally with the Indian cultural ethos. Shashi Deshpande has commented on the significance and purpose that is fulfilled in real life by myths in the 'Afterward' to this collection of short stories, thus, "Myths are still important to us. We do not demolish them, we need them to live by, they have shaped our ideas for a great many years, they embody our dreams. To destroy them would be to leave a large dent in the fabric of our culture. On the other hand, if we are not able to make them meaningful to our lives, they will cease to survive. In India, specially, myths have an extraordinary vitality, continuing to give people some truths about themselves, about the human condition in general. What woman writers are doing today is not a rejection of myths, but a meaningful and creative reinterpretation of them. We are looking for a fresh knowledge of ourselves in them, trying to discover what is relevant to our lives today." The spectrum of Deshpande's women protagonists ranges widely from daughters, wives, mothers, sisters to mistresses and courtesans. Each of these roles has its own equation of man-woman relationship and in context with the 'man' part of the relationship expects different kinds of behaviours and attitude from women in the name of honour, dishonour, right-wrong and so on. Deshpande probes the hearts and psyche of these women characters, setting them in contemporary situations and analyses the myths from a contemporary women's point of view. Deshpande is not trying to negate the myths in any way; her fiction is an adaptation of the myths in contemporary context to serve the needs of the modern women.

The other stories, leaving out the last one, have their themes woven around such mythical women figures who have achieved exemplary feminine behaviour and conduct for the future generations. The mythical image as created by men depicts these women characters with an angelic halo around them, The essence of the issue lies in the fact that they are depicted so, because they easily submit to their male counterparts without even an iota of protest.



Considering the man-woman relationship of Ram and Sita, one can easily understand that Sita is glorified as the 'ideal' for every Indian woman because she silently suffered every problem that came her husband's way and is also submissive to his just and unjust expectations out of her without trying to present her 'side of the story' or putting up even a single question. Honouring her marriage relationship, she sets one of the most glorious examples of all times by accompanying her husband when he is exiled to the rugged hardships of wilderness. Then, there is Draupadi who in a rare incident agrees to accept five men, the Pandavas as her husband's despite Arjun being the winner of the Swayamwar for her and thus the only rightful candidate. Kunti's relationship with her husband Pandu is one in which, even though, his wife, she accepts the reality of her husband's unabetting love for Mandri. Kunti, eventually a young widow, trapped in the patriarchal system, ends up being a mute spectator to her elder brother-in-law's sons, the Kauravas' never ending acts of tyranny against the Pandavas.

Typical traits that are dumped on to a woman by the Indian society are tolerance, lack of protest, faithfulness, subjugation and so on. A woman who conforms to these idealistic chains of masked slavery to men is praised as noble and 'good' whereas a woman who deviates, is at once, characterless and evil or bad. Decidedly, the softer characteristics of women include tolerance, love, companion, care, faithfulness and so on, nevertheless, self assertion or expressing one's will, can, in no way, be the opposite to expression of these traits. Deshpande brings to surface the protesting and defiant face of a woman and to do thus, she uses the contexts, figures and situations from mythology but the responses are presented as reactionary, deconstructing the ideal, man devised mythological model to search and create Nahal's 'replacement mode' which he explains as "it is very difficult to construct a replacement model. One cannot escape the myth-the conditioning myth with which one has grown up. Unless we construct new myths, we cannot construct replacement model. We all revere Sita and Savitri; they did something out of loyalty out of dedication. We cannot escape the myths. So, the replacement models are to be constructed in the context of the myths we already have."

Deshpande's 'The Inner Rooms' presents the sorry condition of the sisters, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. As the title indicates, the inner rooms are deemed to be the right place for these women who were abducted by Bheeshma, asserting, the principle of patriarchal authority. The rules of the man-woman games are formulated by the men like mighty Bheeshma to over power, but, Amba is smart enough to realize Bheeshma's ploy and as an act of defiance, refuses to marry Matravirya. Not only this, she dares to reveal her desire and love for another man, Salva, in front of the entire court as an attempt to free herself from the clutches of Bheeshma. She exhibits exemplary and uncommon courage and daring in announcing that she could not marry the man chosen for her by Bheeshma as she has already chosen for herself, Salva, the King of Saubha, much before she was forcefully held captive by Bheeshma. Deshpande has used her fiction to demonstrate how woman's plea for justice and acceptance of her desire fall on the deaf ears of the social leader's patriarchy. After all, for them, she was just a woman and as such, to be disregarded and ignored with her desire only fit to be set aside as if of no consequences and all this just because she happened to the 'woman' in the man-woman continuum. The message sent loud and clear to the women since times immemorial has been that they are destined to be neglected and ignored. Amba's man-woman relationship with Salva, her fiancé, is one of treachery as even though she dares to declare herself to be his, he offers her only deception in the name of love by refusing to accept her by commenting that "Bheeshma defeated me, you now belong to him, I will be dishonoured if I take you for my wife." A stunned Amba marks the turning point of the story with her transformation into a new woman who is quite capable of rationalizing and questioning, "Honour, dishonor, right, wrong-what are these but words used by men to cover their real emotions? Bheeshma was angry, Vichitravirya humiliated, and now Salva is ashamed, where is honour here? Or the dishonour" These questions of Amba are the ones asked very often by women. The feminine factor in Amba rises as a feminist once again in her quest of answers to her questions. Looking for a substitute, she discovers it in her own free judgment. The narrative reflects the tortured sensibility of a woman who is not ready to compromise with male domination. Rather than live a life of humiliation, Amba chooses to die. Deshpande beautifully recreates Amba's mythical anecdote and portrays how her free will wins, if not in life, then, in her death.

The theme of Deshpande's short fiction, 'And What Has Been Decided?', tackles the frustration, anger and anguish of Draupadi, after she is humiliated to the extent of being disrobed by her brothers-in-law in the presence of an open court, packed full by society's custodians, and in the presence of all five of her husbands. The delayed, or rather, no response from any of them, leave alone aggressive retaliation or revenge, gave birth to the rebel in Draupadi who protested strongly against the way the men could treat a woman's insult so casually. Confined to their man-woman relationships, these mythological women share a common bond between them through their respective experiences such as Draupadi as narrated above, as Sita's protest of her husband Rama's order of her exile in Deshpande's short story, 'The Day of the Golden Deer', as Kunti's recollective outbursts in her 'Hear Me.., Sanjay', as the intimate exchange of agonizing experiences of Sachidevi and Nahusha's wife in Deshpande's 'Mirrors' and alike others who crave for self assertion and choose the medium of protest of



these women, in one aspect or the other of their man-women relationship representing the objection of their entire race against eras of subjugation and suppression.

Deshpande underscores the essentially patriarchal bias as evident in ancient myths, while, simultaneously, stressing upon the requirement to rethink and re-produce those myths in order to project female representation. Her fictional themes often include Hindu philosophy and ethics and demythologizations of archetypes like Sita and Savitri to delineate her female character's quest for self identity and manifestation of self-expression. Deshpande's short stories are witness to her effective synergy of the Indian spirit and ethos.

Deshpande's reinterpretation of our Indian myths, establishing contemporary relevance has carved her acumen out as an awakened feminist critic, who as a conscious writer fulfills her responsibility as that of a vigilant cultural custodian. Shashi Deshpande does not belong to the category of a social reformer nor to that of a preacher, but her belief is that a sharp focus on people all around us does help to understand the world and her characters better. She candidly confesses that her ideas and articulations and also those of other writers form substantial understanding of humans and humanity generally. While writing, Deshpande is extremely involved with life and to understand life, she focuses intensely on her characters.

References

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