

Shashi Deshpande's Treatment of Indian Epic Myths: A Reinterpretation

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According to Jasodhara Bagchi, Indian womanhood is constituted by a multilayered accretion of myths, which in their turn essentialize and thereby homogenize the myth of 'Bharatiyanari' within the hegemonic ideology of patriarchy and thus serve patriarchy in both its local and global manifestations. As per these myths a woman is the pure vessel of virginity, chaste wife, weak and owned by her husband or the self-denying mother, never an independent entity.¹ Deshpande reverses this Pativrata myth by presenting her protagonists as vulnerable to a certain extent.

Shashi Deshpande has interpreted the stories of mythological women like Sita, Draupadi and Kunti and given them a liberated voice in her collection of short stories *The Stone Women*. Even in her novels neither Jaya in '**That Long Silence**', nor Urmi in '**The Binding Vine**' are presented as Pativratas. Certain other fictions of womanhood prevalent in India are concerned with woman's sexuality and motherhood. Thus the ideal of womanhood is that of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness, which cannot be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband's rejections. In India motherhood is usually glorified. But the mental anguish and trauma that a woman undergoes during this phase of her life are often neglected by patriarchy who constructs the images of ideal motherhood. Her protagonist Jaya, through a process of introspection, realizes the patriarchal agenda behind the construction of these myths of femininity and she comes out of the illusion that all these myths are natural and try to assert themselves. Deshpande achieves this end by presenting these myths as well as their ironic reversals simultaneously.

The story titled '**The Day of the Golden Deer**' explores the feelings of Sita on her desertion by Rama. She is anguished by Rama's belief that his image as the righteous, the perfect ruler should not be tarnished. She asks Laxmana, who has accompanied her into the forest, "he is dutiful, I know that Laxmana, and righteous too. I never doubt that, but tell me this, Laxmana, what happens to those who are crushed under the chariot of his righteousness?"² Deshpande's Sita does not believe in fate. According to her one cannot escape the consequences of one's actions. She accepts that her abduction by Ravana and her subsequent sufferings were a consequence of her own actions "first, her desire for the golden deer and then her love for the husband that made her afraid that he had been hurt and she said the cruel words to Laxmana which finally drove him away leaving her lonely and vulnerable. The first time she had come to the forest with Rama was the result of Dashrath's weakness "the weakness of a doting old husband for a young and beautiful wife. She realises that this time she will have to suffer for her husband's desire to be perfect "to be the king who put duty before self. Sita decides to be silent and accepts Rama's decision not because she wants to be remembered as the one who endured and forgave, or because she is good and merciful, a virtuous and devoted wife, but because she pities him. She knows he is chasing a mirage, a delusion, and a chimera of perfection."

"**Inner Rooms**" written in the same mythical vein articulates the feelings and emotional reaction of Amba as a woman to the injustice and humiliations hurled upon her by the male chauvinists of her time. Bhishma abducted Amba along with her two sisters, as brides for Vichitravirya, the boy King of Hastinapur. Amba is in love with another King. In deference to the code of conduct, she is sent to that king, who refuses to accept her as he had lost her in battle with Bhishma and thus legally he could claim no right to the girl. Amba goes back to Bhishma and the boy King, but the boy King this time refuses to marry her as the code of conduct forbids him to marry a woman who is in love with another man. Flustered Amba turns to Bhishma who in turn refuses saying it would be a contravention of his vow of life-long celibacy. Finally, Amba kills herself. By the motif of inner rooms the writer quite unequivocally manifests the truth that women in society don't have any access to the world of reality beyond their household harems. They are "left behind in the inner rooms, stoically waiting for their husband(s) to visit them at night, living in the constant hope of bearing him sons." They are forced to live substandard life as playthings and pawns of men. Amba says that the freedom accorded to her to choose a husband of her own liking is illusory as finally it is the man's will that is done. When women are even to wish to have things their own way, denying to be duped into accepting the foisted image of a good woman, they are deliberately ostracized, by machinations and iniquitous rules fabricated by them exclusively for women.

Neglected and ignored, Amba complains helplessly, "Oh, god to be and not to be seen; to speak and not to be heard ... trapped in those inner rooms..."³ Thus to Bhishma on his way back to Hastinapur after kidnapping Amba ,

her pleadings were quite immaterial whereas a shout from Shalva was sufficient for him to stop and listen. A woman has no say in the matter concerning her own life because, “She was only a woman, she was to be disregarded, ignored; her will, her determination had to be set aside as nothing because she was a woman”.⁴ By exploring the myths the writer brings out the sad truth, that most of our literature is the creation of men and unfortunately women themselves have brought themselves to accept it as the truth. The writer seems to be disgruntled about the fact that women don't try to peep into their hearts to identify their true selves but they accept the things they read in fictional or mythological books and see existing in society. Shashi Deshpande said: “The point is that all, these stories in myths, legends and oral literature have been created by men to fulfill their various needs. There is the eternal child to be protected and controlled, the self-sacrificing mother to nurture and cherish the man, the chaste partner to guarantee exclusive sexual rights and an undoubted paternity of the children and the temptress to titillate and provide sexual gratification.”

‘**Hear me Sanjaya**’ is one of the most articulate and moving short stories written by Shashi Deshpande. It belongs to the new genre of stories in which women writers retell the stories of Indian mythology. It is another story where Shashi Deshpande has lent voice to Kunti, the eternally silent mother of Pandava brothers in epic Mahabharata: Kunti's feelings and the reasons behind her actions are revealed and given a voice when she takes a walk with Sanjaya, the charioteer to the blind king Dhritrashtra. This takes place after the epic war is over. After handing over the kingdom to Kunti's victorious sons Dhritrashtra and Gandhari decide to seek peace in the forest and Kunti decides to follow them. By giving voice to Kunti in a monologue spoken just before her death in the forest, Shashi Deshpande tries to show what moved this woman who had to bear a multitude of disasters in her life, very silently. In Mahabharata, Kunti's actions play a significant role but no reasons or explanations are given for these actions which are sometimes bordering on bizarre. She somehow remains in the background throughout the epic. Her feelings on having to take care of the five young children, on facing the enmity between Duryodhana and her sons or on making Draupadi marry all the five Pandavas remain untold. Through the monologue Kunti traverses her whole life from the time when as a young child, she was given away in adoption to king Kunti Bhoja. As a result she lost her name Pritha. Deshpande makes her Kunti wonder, “my father gave me away” how easily he gave me away. As if I was a bit of property. I can't even remember if it made me angry. But I remember I was frightened”.⁵ In another important episode of her life as a young and unmarried girl Kunti could not keep the baby born as a result of her prayer to the Sun God, and had to let it float away in a basket on the river. The association with the river are subtly hinted at in this story when Deshpande's Kunti does not want to be close to a river. She says, “The sound of a river makes me uneasy, it fills me with strange thoughts”.⁶ This sentence makes the reader understand what a river any river, means to Kunti who had had to abandon her first child and let it float away in a basket on a river. After getting married, Kunti is aware of the fact that she is not beautiful. She is painfully aware of the doting love of her husband for his exquisitely beautiful second wife Madri. As a result all the responsibilities come to her. Later, she decides that Draupadi should become the wife of all the five Pandava brothers to save the unity amongst the brothers as she had seen how enamoured the brothers especially Bhima was of her. Thus, through these small details the character of Kunti is given the blood and flesh so necessary to cover the skeletal picture one gets of Kunti in the epic. This new Kunti proves beyond doubt what a fallacy it is to talk of women as the weaker sex. Since the time she gave birth to Kama even when she was very young and unmarried, she does what she feels has to be done, even if that means casting aside her emotions ruthlessly. She does not allow herself the luxury of indulging in her emotions except in this story of Deshpande. This Kunti is a woman who speaks to our hearts, whom we can understand and sympathize with.

In an interview Shashi Deshpande says what she has done through her writing is not a suggestion of any replacement model for the traditional role models of Sita or Savitri. She thinks that through her writing, she is in a sense, deconstructing the myth. “I am not saying don't take these women as role model. See them for what they are otherwise the pressure on you is going to be very difficult, if you are expected to be a Sita, pativrata' in the sense of Sita, who never wrongs her husband, never does anything wrong. You can never be like that and you will always feel guilty. I am just telling you that let us see Sita as a human being”.⁷

By giving voice to these hitherto silent women characters Deshpande has given them a new lease of life. This is, as Valli Rao says, “not a rejection of myths, but a meaningful and creative reinterpretation of them. We are looking forward to a fresh knowledge of ourselves in them trying to discover what is relevant to our lives today. We don't reject the ideals but we know we cannot approximate to these pictures of ideal womanhood. More important than knowing what we are not is to know what we are what is possible for us.”⁸ Through such re-readings and re-interpretations myths need to be liberated from the fallacy that they are relevant only to one sex. The characters in myths, especially the women characters should be prevented from being reduced into stereotypes making them a kind of final statement. Rather, these characters need to be seen as complex, questioning human beings whom we can identify with.

Deshpande does not use myth and legends in her stories and novels as embellishment or for local colour or ethnic appliqué work. Myths, legends and folklore are deeply engrained in the Indian Psyche, they are a part of our collective unconscious and through the subverted use of these myths, Deshpande tries to reconstruct, deconstruct and reorder the female identity in her works. This revisionary use of myths also adds an element of inter-textuality to her writings through the transposition of the implications of womanhood involved in these myths into that of contemporary reality of womanhood, refreshing and revising the connotations of both.

Shashi tries to project the fact that tales about women, which so far had been narrated from man's point of view, should be retold from women's point of view. A woman speaking for herself or for the whole of womankind is quite different from a man telling a woman's tale. Here an attempt is made to bring out this idea of woman explicating herself and emerging out of the cocoon of self-pity to spread her wings of self-confidence, as present in some select writings of Shashi Deshpande.

The woman becomes successful at last in the story entitled 'The Legacy.' An old doctor dies after telling his young friend about a son who should be found and given all his wealth. The young man had so far not even known that the doctor had married. The doctor's story was strange. An impotent rich man hired the doctor when he was a young man to beget a son through his (the rich man's) wife. The young man had obliged and kept up his promise of never coming anywhere near the lady throughout his lifetime. Now that he was dying, he revealed the secret. The young friend too found the lady and the son and without revealing the identity of the donor, gave away the wealth. He met her later out of curiosity. He also found out that the son born of the doctor had died even as a child and the son who was there at present, was another man's son. After revealing this truth, the lady laughed. We wonder if the lady laughed at fate or the doctor who bequeathed the money or her impotent husband or the young friend who came to see her. In all, she had been used but she perhaps had come through all that unscathed and laughed at the twist in life. The laugh is definitely not at her expense. The men and their reputation are at stake.

Without being feminist in approach it cannot and should not be taken for granted that the women have been victimised and it is time now to turn the tables against the men. But what emerges from Shashi Deshpande's writing is precisely this point that men try and give up easily and go on to fresh fields but women stay and fight on and do emerge victorious after most battles. They may be weak and may even be oppressed. But they have the will power to rise up like a phoenix out of its own ashes. Of Course there are exceptions. There are men of undaunted spirit and women who are villainous, selfish and weak-spirited. However, here we are looking at Shashi Deshpande as a spokesman for those class of women who go unsung and unnoticed by the society, and who need to be projected as rare specimens who have evolved themselves from utter subjection to the freedom of the spirit at last and are celebrated. The mother in 'Can You Hear Silence' describes her beautiful childhood home, with its tiled roof.

"Sometimes, in summer, we slept in the courtyard. We could lie in the dark and watch the stars come out. And everything was so quiet that when we spoke the words came out soft, as if we were afraid of hurting the silence [...]. There was just silence. I wonder whether I'll ever hear silence again,' she says sadly.

'Hear silence? Kow can you hear silence?' Rashmi challenges.

You'll know some day — if you ever get out of this place.' 'Sounds silly to me, hearing silence,' Rashmi says scornfully.

But just as I'm drifting back into sleep, I see a picture before my closed eyes. A house with a tiled roof. The rain is falling on it with a soft patter. A bird sitting silent and still, huddled up because it's cold. And I think of Mummy's words and wonder, like Rashmi had done — can you hear silence? Will I hear it one day?"⁹

The mother's vision of her childhood home is so poignant that the child imbibes unconsciously the desire not only to hear silence but also to live and be brought up in such a peaceful atmosphere. That was what was lacking in that child's life which was only full of noise, commotion, confusion and unrest. Silence could hardly prevail.

Silence was there in Jaya's life. It was a forced silence when she had refused to communicate openly with those around her for, she feared that she would hurt them. Jaya is the protagonist in *That Long Silence*. She is supposed to be a writer but she has not been successful in her chosen career. Her husband has been alleged with malpractice in his office and has been asked to leave the job. She has a son, Rahul, who is difficult and selfish and refusing to understand the atmosphere that prevails, at home. Jaya has her own past which intervenes with her present day existence which is also beset with too many problems. Jaya is in a fix. She cannot even get away. She did once walkout of the house and went about aimlessly. Suddenly she came upon a beautiful garden and sat at a bench. But a man had come and sat next to her and said, "Hello, sister!" with a leering smile. She had got away from there and after some more aimless walking, had returned home. She was asked where she had been for such a long time and that the family members were hungry. She could have laughed at that time or have cried for herself when the strange man had said hello to her. She did neither but just got on with her life. As she watches Rahul and Vasant conversing, she sees them not as being related to her but as two persons who were at ease with each other and with themselves.

'What is it, Mummy?' Rahul, feeling my gaze on him, asks. 'Nothing', I say, shaking my head. But it is *not* nothing. I've seen things differently. As if I've put my head down and looked at the world from between my legs. The world not just upside down but different.

I've always thought — there's only one life, no chance of a reprieve, no second chances. But in this life itself there are so many crossroads, so many choices. *Yatheccyasi tatha kuru* — I had seen the Sanskrit words in Appa's diary after his death [...] the line was from the *Bhagwadgita* 'Do as you desire!' What are Prophets and Masters for if not to tell you what to do? But now I understand. With

this line, after all those millions of words of instruction, Krishna confers humanness on Arjuna. 'I have given you knowledge. Now make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire.'¹⁰

The ultimate choice is left to the individual. Jaya's realisation is the modern woman's stance too. Shashi Deshpande makes the character come through after all the turmoil in flying colours. Everyone of us is like Arjuna and we have our own special battles of Kurukshetra to wage. We can fight or choose not to fight but submit ourselves to some power on earth. Whatever be the choice, the resultant fame or blame will be on the individual alone. No one else can take the responsibility for that. Knowing this unconsciously, people are afraid to change themselves. They live in a set mode and refuse to come out on an adventure of the spirit. In the words of Mukta, 'People don't change.' As Jaya herself feels,

"It is true. 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."¹¹

Therefore women are the neophytes. They rise up from the state of utter despondency and ascend to the very pinnacle of self-realization. The kind of maturity that is evinced by some of the women characters is quite striking — as seen in the characters of the mother in '**Can You Hear Silence**', '**Why a Robin**', '**An Antidote to Boredom**' and '**It was the Nightingale**'. Men, on the contrary, are seen as being a little less dignified in the writings of Deshpande — as seen in the characters of the husband of '**The First Lady**', the young man who murders an older woman in the story '**Anatomy of a murder**', the man who marries the polio stricken girl more of the money she earned each month along with what was bestowed on her by her father in '**The Valley in Shadow**'. This is clearly seen in the case of the husband in the story '**The Intrusion**' and the character of Manohar, Sarita's husband, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The former has brutal sex with the woman he married even though she says that they have to get to know each other before they can have a physical relationship. The man demanded sex as his birthright and is portrayed more as a creature with physical animal instincts instead of being an understanding consort. The latter, the character of Manohar, is that of a husband who cannot brook his wife's growth and reputation and therefore inflicts physical brutality on her every night but behaves absolutely normal, during daytime.

Similar is the story of '**A Liberated Woman**'. The husband behaves brutally with his famous wife. As the woman says:

"It's his way, the only way, perhaps, of taking revenge on Me for what I've done to him. To his ego. Oh yes, I can reason it out coldly, logically enough in the daytime. But at night, I become just a terrified animal. I can't scream, because the kids in the next room may hear. I can't cry, the kids may hear. I can't fight back, either, he's too strong for me. [...] And so I just endure."¹²

Because this woman was successful professionally and socially, she was called a liberated woman. Hardly! A woman abused by her husband cannot be liberated. If she had walked out on her husband, perhaps she can be called so. Then, if Shashi still calls this woman liberated, there must be some other reason. This title is not mere sarcasm. The woman can be said to be liberated, when she knows the root cause of all her problems and also knows that it is within her power to stop it all if only she wishes so. But being an Indian, there lies her greatness. She has to stay put and fight her battles. Leaving everything and walking away from the problems — is not the way to solve those problems. She has to accost the demons that threaten to destroy her happiness and her very peace of mind and overcome them by understanding them and conquering them without ever giving up her right to live her own life.

'**The First Lady**' tells us about the disenchantment of success and how power corrupts man's finer sensibilities and the change that comes over him. Women are not ruled or swayed by any great ambition. That is for men. Women are more associated with petty quarrels, gossip mongering and silly tantrums. Deshpande retains the typical image of man but goes beyond the established role of women. She does show them as women busy with house-keeping and child-rearing: but she also shows them as beings who try to understand what is happening to them and the men around them and try to make things better for everyone. The old woman, in '**The First Lady**', watches the transformation of her husband from a dedicated patriot to a self-centred politician fond of fame and celebrity, and remains a mute witness, knowing fully well that there was no glory in the false life they were leading. She remembered the First Independence Day Celebration at midnight when her husband had spoken a few words.

"And standing there, watching all those ecstatic faces wet with rain and tears, she had thought — this [...] this is the beginning of glory. Only, she thought now, looking sadly at the faces in the room, it had not been the beginning but the end of the glory. And life has lost its meaning because it relates to nothing but one's own petty concerns."¹³

Now it is too late in life to attempt to change her husband's ways. Her own desire for the younger man had been her fault but she had not given in, having vowed to celibacy, earlier. She knows what is wrong with their life. Suffice to say, that knowledge itself is strength.

'**Mirrors**' and '**The Inner Rooms**' are tales from our Purans and epics. '**Mirrors**' is about how there can be greatness even in the enemy's wife. It is all about how Nahusha's wife makes Sachidevi, Indra's wife, realise her own responsibilities as wife and Queen. It is not enough if the wife is obedient and bears with all the atrocities committed by the husband. That can be done. But when the time demands, the wife also has to take steps to protect herself and

her state when there lurks danger and no husband to protect her. Written like a dramatic monologue, “Mirrors” captures the true emotions behind the masks of both the Queens. Nahusha’s wife comes to Sachidevi, Indra’s wife and tells her to rise up to the occasion. Indra was in hiding and Nahusha was about to take over Indra’s throne and his Queen. How could Sachidevi escape from the predicament! Nahusha’s wife gave selfless advice, even though she knew that Nahusha would meet with destruction in the end. She helped Sachidevi to remain chaste at the face of strong entreaties from Nahusha. In a way she was protecting Nahusha from becoming another Indra, who coveted other people’s wives. The Queen of Indra rises to the occasion and ultimately brings Nahusha to his doom and Indra back to the throne. She knows that Indra will remain sober and good for some time but later it would all be back to square one.

“It’s not a comfortable state, I admit that; no, it is disturbing to see the lies, the cruelties, the deceptions, to know that only the dishonest and sycophants can survive and flourish here [...]. It seems worse to be able to see things and to be unable to do anything, terrible to know your own powerlessness [...]. But, perhaps someday [...].”¹⁴

Perhaps, some day, the change would come. As long as there is hope in the human heart, there is scope for life and redemption.

In ‘**The Inner Rooms**’, the story of Amba is retold. After Sage Vyasa and all his translators, for the first time, we hear of the wrongs done to a woman in the Mahabharata, through the writings another woman. “What we want to reach at finally is the telling, the breaking of silence.”¹⁵ Amba seeks vengeance against Bhishma for having captured her and ruined her life with her betrothed, the King of Saubha. The puny stature of Vichitravirya and Bhishma’s terrible vow do not allow her to find her destiny in Hastinapur. Spurned from all udes, and not finding any solution to her strange predicament, Amba seeks to immolate herself. Death alone could bring solace to her. But Amba dies with one purpose and that is to get back at Bhishma. The Epic tells us that Amba was reborn as Shikandi and was the cause of Bhishma’s death in the war. But Amba had to sacrifice herself in order to wreak her vengeance. This brings us directly to the mythical phoenix which falls into the fire to rejuvenate itself. That is what Amba did.

However good a woman may be, even if it were a Sitadevi, she has to undergo the fire trial. Even then, the society keeps doubting her. Hence, every now and then, the trial has to be undergone by the woman. The trial may take on so many forms. But the woman must go through them all. The Indian ‘woman, as it emerges from the stories of Shashi Deshpande, does not run away from it all. She stands her ground and fights it out with silent power. There lies the greatness of the Indian women and the writer who identifies, in modern times, this undaunted spirit of the Indian women.

“If I have to plug that ‘hole in the heart,’ I will have to speak, to listen, I will have to erase the silence between us. While studying Sanskrit drama, I’d learnt with a sense of outrage that its rigid rules did not permit women characters to speak Sanskrit. They had to use Prakrit — a language that had sounded to my ears like a baby’s lisp. The anger I’d felt then comes back to me when I realise what I’ve been doing all these years. I have been speaking Prakrit myself.”¹⁶

The woman has to realise her position and uplift herself. There is no one else to give her a helping hand. She has to help herself, express herself and find a firm footing for herself in the family and the society.

To sum up the characteristics of the personalities projected by Shashi Deshpande, one can say that most of the characters of the men and women projected in most of her short stories, belong to the middle-class. Money is an important factor in their everyday existence. Hence the wife who brings money is “kept” as a hen that lays golden eggs. The man is the dominant factor in the Indian family set up. He exercises his superiority, not by winning better bread than his wife but by inflicting physical abuse and having brutal sex with the wife who is, after all, his slave. She may be a big person in society; she may be famous; she may earn more money than he does. Yet, within the four walls, he makes it very clear as to who the real master is. The woman stoops only to conquer herself and the difficult situations, later. She does not try to conquer or override the man.

In most of the stories that we have analyzed so far, we do not see the existence of true love though there is a tendency towards altruistic love. The woman seems to be bearing the yoke more with resignation and not with dedication and love. This may be so because there is no expression of true love and affection from her counterpart, the husband. The give-and-take of familial life is almost never present. There is always an ulterior motive for the husband which puts off the wife from truly loving her husband.

Shashi Deshpande presents such of those human feelings as forgotten or those that are in the process of being effaced from the pages of human history. She makes them come alive as characters that seem real and as though belonging to our own neighbourhood. Her style is lucid and the language is always kept simple and commonplace. Her attitude to her characters seems to be compassionate and sympathetic. There is magic in her writing in that we feel as if we are close to the experiences that are projected in her writings.

The ultimate message of her writings seems to be what was presented in *That Long Silence*.

Yathechasi Tatha Kuru

“Do as you desire.” The choice is left to the individual. As mentioned earlier, the Indian women being what they are choose to be subjected in the family set up. As the Tamil saying goes, “Be he a stone or even a blade of grass, He is

the Husband.” He is the boss. It is not for the woman to choose to run away. Even when she does, she comes back on her own accord. She has an important role to play and she cannot afford to miss playing it. Thus, the modern Indian woman expresses her courage in her choice to stay and face fresh challenges boldly and with self-confidence.

When we analyze as to how the ordinary, suffering woman emerges as a neophyte, we can see that there arises a crisis in the woman’s life which culminates in her self-realization. It needs a crisis to make her understand that she has hidden potential. She does not use this potential to defy the man or the society. But she rather uses it to remain sane, sensible and intact, in order to play her role in the family as daughter, wife and mother and in the society as a responsible human being. The role of woman in society has not been explored by Shashi Deshpande. She only excels in individual analysis within the family set-up.

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