

Then and Now: Reworking of *Mahabharata* by Shashi Deshpande

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“Life is a steady mythical identification, a procession in the footsteps of others, a sacred repetition.”

Thomas Mann

ABSTRACT

Story-telling is a natural phenomenon of human life, far away from the boundaries of culture, and languages and myths are the most fascinating, inspiring, and provoking sources for stories across the ages and geographical limits. Shashi Deshpande is one of the few Indian English writers who have acknowledged the influence of myths on society and worked with Indian mythological characters with improved focus and vision. She tries to manipulate a constant parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity. Some of her short stories are highly influenced by mythological tales and characters through which she gets a tour of ancient spheres of life to resolve all kinds of social, political, and spiritual apprehensions. The present paper proposes an in-depth analysis of some selected mythological characters from Mahabhartha portrayed in Deshpande's short stories where she articulates these mythological characters to bring out the original ideals of womanhood. It aims to study that how Deshpande rejects stereotypes of mythological characters of Kunti in *Hear me Sanjaya*, Amba in *The Inner Rooms*, Draupadi in *And What has been Decided*, and Lord Krishna in *My Beloved Charioteer* and re-questions their identity. Deshpande portrays these characters speaking to their mind and soul not being dominated by any social conditioning. The attempt here is to explore the theme of patriarchal dominance and biased gender roles by exploring the feminist threads in these stories.

KEYWORDS

Mythology; reworking; womanhood; patriarchy; contemporary; society.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent novelists of contemporary Indian literature in English. Her stories cover a huge gamut of human emotions, interests, and motives and always get the attention of readers and critics because of their thematic exuberance, multidimensional structure, and stylistic experiments, and also for the discursive

obstinacy. She is one of those Indian English writers who gave the context of mythological characters in her short stories to explain the unexplainable and to evolve her characters (especially female characters) completely. In the present paper, our focus will be on some selected mythological characters from Mahabhartha portrayed in Deshpande's

short stories as Kunti in *Hear me Sanjaya*, Amba in *The Inner Rooms*, Draupadi in *And What has been Decided*, and Lord Krishna in *My Beloved Charioteer*.

Her first book was *The Legacy*, a collection of short stories, and since then she has written more than ninety short stories which are published in two volumes, *Collected Stories, Volume 1 and 2*. The other famous story collections on her credit are *It Was Dark* (1986), *The Miracle and Other Stories* (1986), *It Was Nightingale* (1986), *The Intrusion and Other Stories* (1994), and *The Stone Woman* (2000). In her short stories, Deshpande has interpreted the stories of mythological characters like Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, and Shree Krishana from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. She is highly influenced by Irawati Karve's *Yuganta*. After reading *Yuganta* she gained insight into the Mahabharata. She mentions her reading of *Yuganta*:

Her (Irawati Karve's) readings of the characters in the Mahabharata showed me how differently a woman would view these characters; her interpretations made the women (and even the men) much more real and plausible—at least to me. (*The Stone Women*, Pg 88)

Indian English Writers interpreted different themes based on the anecdotes mentioned in Vedas, Puranas, Upanishad, Ramayana, Mahabharata, various Buddhist scriptures local legends, and folklore. They use mythological legends sometimes to evoke nationalism as in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, somewhere as a satire on social customs as in Kavita Kane's feminist novel *Sita's Sister*, a novel about Urmilla. There is a long list of mythological contexts or characters used by Indian English writers in their writings. According to an observation given by Ambreen Safder Kharbe in his essay *Mythological Exploration in The Thousand*

Faces Of Night, Where Shall We Go This Summer and A Matter Of Time mythological themes in Indian literature first bear their most influential and destiny-defying traces in the two epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Out of all the mythological writings, *Mahabharata* has its unique attraction for the writers because it interprets the complete journey of life that includes everything that can happen in life. The whole epic and its characters are still as relevant today as they have always been. Many Indian English writers have interpreted *The Mahabharata* in a versatile manner and each time it helps them to bring out a new perspective that inspires others. "Being Draupadi – Three Takes" an essay by Titiksha Dhruv represented Draupadi, as an influential female character of *The Mahabharata* whose personality is retold by three famous Indian woman novelists including Dr. Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Kajal Oza Vaidya's *Draupadi*.

Shashi Deshpande's reworking approach to mythological characters is different from the earlier writers. She is one of the foremost literary voices to deal with the issues like the suppressed status of Indian women, their conflict and predicament against the background of contemporary India. She rejected stereotypes and re-questioned the myths to recreate the image of women as presented in mythological writings. She tries to break the long silence of women through her bold narratives. This authentic recreation is the unique feature of her writings. Her stories are a medium of showcasing life with its variety and complexity where readers meet with characters for a few minutes and relate themselves with their scanty relationships and circumstances.

She has redefined the traditional role of women considered as an inferior gender through her narrative strategy. Deshpande reveals the emergence of a new

woman and her journey of evolution from the stage of catastrophe. Draupadi represents a strong woman who struggles hard to acquire her lost female dignity but many other important female characters in *The Mahabharata* are ignored just because of gender bias thinking. Everyone knows about the hundred Kauravs, sons of Dhritrashtra and Gandhari but the character of Duhshala is unidentified without any important explanation. Even Draupadi is considered as a culprit of war by some critics. But Deshpande's characters respond against the patriarchal dominance and the biased gender roles. But she also recognizes that it is very often women who oppress themselves as well as other women due to their values which are the result of centuries of indoctrination. Gandhari, like a traditional wife, chose the path of darkness for her husband's sake.

Hear me Sanjaya is one of the most famous short stories of Deshpande in which she gives the context of Kunti, a silent wife, and mother in *The Mahabharata*. Kunti who faced so many difficulties remains in the background of this epic. Her story of pain from early childhood to death remains untold in the Mahabharata. She never shares her experiences or hardships of taking care of five young children as a single parent, witnessing the enmity between Kauravas and Pandavas even between Pandavas and her son Karna, etc. In the Mahabharata, Kunti does not reveal her viewpoints. But in the story *Hear me Sanjaya* Deshpande gives voice to Kunti through the Monologue at the time of her death. Here Kunti shares her emotions and mental trauma with the readers that how a girl named Pritha was adopted by King Kunti Bhoja and lost her real identity. She strives hard for her self-identity for her whole life. According to Deshpande, Kunti was never a passive voice. Her voice became a turning point on every occasion on which she spoke. Her unknowing advice for Draupadi to all her sons to 'share the prize' resulted

in polyandry for Draupadi. But she never spoke for herself. Deshpande's Kunti is different from Mahabharata's Kunti as she has a strong voice to question the stereotyped social norms. She frankly opens her heart before the readers and talks about the false customs of society where she has to bear the presence of her husband's second wife just because she is less beautiful than her. Deshpande says in an Interview:

I am not saying don't take these women as role models. 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. (In Conversation.... p.157)

Amba, another character from the Mahabharata is depicted in *The Inner Rooms*. In this story, Deshpande boldly deals with the wrongs done by a woman to take revenge for her disgrace. In *The Mahabharata*, Amba who loved prince Salva was abducted by Bhishma to marry his ailing younger brother, King Vichitravirya. After listening to her love for Salva, Bhishma let her go but Salva rejected her. She was rejected by Vichitravirya also. Bhishma also rejected her proposal of marriage. Now being disgraced she killed herself. Amba took rebirth as Shikhandi and became the reason for Bhishma's death but, according to Deshpande, Amba killed herself to make a final effort to have some control over her life. It is the concept of man's honour that led to tragedies. Bhishma's and Salva's rejection or even King Dashratha's acceptance of illogical demands of Kaikayi are examples of honour taken by men. The story of Yudhishtira who lost himself, his brothers, and his wife Draupadi for sake of a game is

another example of a man's idea of honour. Irawati Karve in *Yuganta* breaks new ground when she proves Bhishma responsible for having wronged two generations of women. According to her, those women face hardships in life due to their oath to celibacy. In a similar vein, Deshpande does not glorify the character of Amba but explores the reality behind the myths. In *The Mahabharata* Bhishma was a heroic figure, one of the most respected characters, but for Deshpande, he was responsible for ruining the life of Gandhari, Kunti, Madri, and the princesses of Kashi – Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika. The retelling of Amba's story in *The Inner Rooms* exposes the truth and miserable helplessness of a woman who despite being a princess chose the path of death means eternal silence. Deshpande gave voice to this eternal silence by retelling Amba's real motives behind her death. Amba questions society, "honour, dishonour, right, wrong-what are these but words used by a man to cover their real emotions?" (The Stone Women, Pg 21).

Then, the character of Draupadi, a wife of five men, the Pandavas, is retold by Deshpande in her short story *And What has been Decided?* entirely from a new angle of vision. Draupadi has her own story to tell about her acceptance of five men as her husband. The pain and anguish of Queen Draupadi as a wife of five Kshatriyas is incomparable. She loves Arjuna but to get him as a husband she has to bear another five. Draupadi, in Deshpande's story, is a woman who has no right even over her body. She has to share her bed with five Pandavas. No one realizes her longing and love for Arjuna. Arjuna himself, who had married her, could not understand her problem. She asks Subhadra, "How is it with him alone? How does it feel to have Arjuna alone in your bed? How is it to know his desire for you is a friend, not an enemy?" (Collected Short Stories, Vol. 2, Pg 244)

Even Dharamraja Yudhishtira forgot a man's dharma for his wife and blindly accepted her mother's order to share Draupadi as a commodity. He also lost her in gambling as a lifeless thing. Draupadi's narration in Deshpande's story discloses the male dogma and poor condition of females in the Indian patriarchy system as she mentions:

I am Yudhishtir's Queen, not his beloved. He keeps a distance between us. And Bhima treats me like a fragile, precious flower he is afraid to pluck. He cannot see the woman in me, the woman hungry for love, for passion. And Nakul and Sahadev are only boys. But Arjuna. (Collected Short Stories, Vol. 2, Pg 243)

Draupadi was represented as a rebel in *The Mahabharata* but no one tried to understand her inner fury and pain. After being dishonoured before her husband and family members, Pandavas thought of reconciliation (Sandhi) with the Kauravas seems evitable to her. Deshpande's Draupadi asks herself that a man, who never forgives his wife's disobedience or disloyalty (may be as fake as blame on Sita) is ready to forget her insult in an open court and ready to make peace. But she soon realizes that promises made to women, mean so little. Like Deshpande, Pratibha Ray in *Yajnaseni* portrayed Draupadi as an 'agent of change' who holds the Pandavas together. She presented Draupadi as an unfortunate woman, trapped by circumstances. Draupadi's narration in *And What has been Decided?* extremely heart-whelming and reveals her inner painful outrage. She feels like a pawn in the hands of her husband. She satirically tells Krishana, her friend, "He did wrong when he gambled his wife away." (The Stone Women, Pg 26) Deshpande looks at the story of Draupadi from a different angle. She portrays her character with a humanistic approach

where she is actually not responsible for the war. They were Pandavs only who used her anguish to achieve their real motive of getting the empire. The brave Pandavas used their wife's firing words as a shield.

Deshpande does not reinterpret Indian myths as being a feminist critic only but fulfils her responsibility as a cautious cultural custodian. Her story *My Beloved Charioteer* describes the existence of two widowed women Aiji and Aarti, a mother and a daughter. The story depicts the mother and daughter relationship as well as the women's role as a wife. Aiji, Aarti's mother being the oldest one takes care of everyone in the house and shares a special bond with Priti, Aarti's daughter. Aarti, a lady in depression, spends most of the time smoking and looking at the walls of her room in memory of her dead father and husband. Priti is the only hope or reason for the existence of mother and daughter. In this story, Deshpande refers to Lord Krishna from *The Mahabharata* as the Beloved Charioteer. In *The Mahabharata*, Krishna played the role of a charioteer for Arjuna and gave him true knowledge by explaining the theory of Karma. Deshpande's Krishna is like hope in despair. In this story, Priti is the charioteer who takes the hold of the engine of hope for Aiji and Aarti. Aiji tells about Priti "When she is gone, silence settles on the house. A silence that will not lift till she returns..." (Text and Their Worlds 2016, Pg 149)

The role of Krishna in the Mahabharata wherein he drives Arjun's chariot is multifunctional and crucial. Deshpande used this mythological reference to reveal the fact that Priti is the driving force in these two women's life. But the major fact she emphasizes is that not a male but a female can be the source of hope in someone's life in this male-dominated

society. Not only a man but a woman also can be a charioteer for someone. A woman can lead a happy life without a man with a female-only. Again, here in this story, one can feel the bold voice of Shashi Deshpande to redefine the woman's identity. Here she condemns the thought of Simone de Beauvoir:

Women have no virile myths in which their projects are reflected, they still dream through the dreams of men. Gods made by males are the gods they worship. (Afterword, *The Stone Women*, Pg 88).

Deshpande peeps into Aiji's heart who is enjoying her widowhood in the company of Priti and provides her with an opportunity to articulate his inner turmoil at the end of the story by revealing the facts of her stifling marriage to Aarti. Her ideas about marriage are similar to Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote, in *Second Sex* that marriage diminishes man, which is often true, but almost always it annihilates women.

Shashi Deshpande's short stories are embedded in the Indian context like other Indian English writers but her aim is different from others. She writes intending to give voice to the marginalized and silenced. All the mythological characters we have discussed in the present paper are used to give voice to the voiceless. Deshpande attempted to relive mythology through these characters as she points out in *The Stone Women* "...the basic problem is that not only myths have originated with men, their interpretation has also been in male hands." (Pg 87) Thus, Deshpande's contexts, figures, and situations given in her stories are mythological but the responses and reactions are analogous to contemporary women.

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