

Right to Voice: Women in Action

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Abstract

This paper seeks to focus primarily on three short narratives of Shashi Deshpande all of which select women from mythology apart from Draupadi and Sita namely-Kunti, Amba, and Sachi. They feature in the stories 'Hear me Sanjaya' 'Inner Rooms', and Mirrors' respectively; first published in '*The Stone Women and other stories*' and subsequently in *Collected Stories Volume I and Volume II*. The retelling of these women's experiences expresses their right to voice. They are examined with contemporary feminist perspective which stresses upon the body and articulation of rights in the patriarchal order. They include questioning moments where gender roles are concerned.

Keywords: Mythology, retelling, right to voice, feminist perspective, questioning moments.

The growing desire to be recognized as a 'countable' human being and the freedom to choose are formidable reasons why women writers have opted to dwell on characters from epics which are essentially male constructs. Susie Tharu & K. Lalita tracing the evolution of Indian feminism, refer to Mary Anne Ferguson's anthology, *Images of Women in Literature* which regards images of women as mothers, submissive wives, seductresses, or inspiration for male artistes as false images of women. The concluding section 'Women Becoming' incorporates fictional 'account by women writers, of women's working lives, their relationships with each other, their struggles and their aspirations.'(14), reflecting women's real worlds. This anthology contributed a great deal to inspire women writers to portray more complex and less stereotypical female characters. Indian feminism which developed over the middle of the twentieth century is concerned with empowerment of women and their emancipation from the fetters of patriarchy. Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are male constructs. So are the female characters present in them. The two great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are rich resources regarding information about the culture and lifestyle of ancient India. Women characters figure prominently in these narratives, yet they neither have major voice nor are presented as thinking women. This paper seeks to focus primarily on three short narratives of Shashi Deshpande all of which select women from

mythology apart from Draupadi and Sita namely-Kunti, Amba, and Sachi . They feature in the stories ‘Hear me Sanjaya’ ‘Inner Rooms’, and Mirrors’ respectively; first published in ‘*The Stone Women and other stories*’ and subsequently in *Collected Stories Volume I and Volume II*. The retelling of these women’s experiences expresses their right to voice. They are examined with contemporary feminist perspective which stresses upon the body and articulation of rights in the patriarchal order. They include questioning moments where gender roles are concerned. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha also cite’ Gilbert & Gubar who opine that women writers had to face a double burden of confronting myths of creativity as well as the ideal of the ‘eternal feminine’ that was set up as inspiration and complement to the male’(20). Women in these epics feature as goddesses to be worshipped or as ideals to be emulated. Men are heroic figures and symbols of righteousness; wielding authority to control society and particularly women. Women thus become either objects of worship or sheer possessions of men to be ill-treated at will. Women writers began to question the validity of such male constructs. So, it is obvious that feminists and contemporary women would want to create voices for the relatively silent women in the ancient stories. This brings them back to the mythical characters, all of whom have been acted upon by the dominantly male narrative universe in which epic and myth places them. Arshia Sattar’s observation, ‘Women writers can find the flaw in the crystal that Ramanujan alerted us to, and can work around it – cutting and polishing so that the crystal reflects us as clearly as it has reflected our ancestors’. (Sattar) justifies the women writers stand to question myths created by men all the more.

The retelling and recasting of myths over the years has found expression in literary writings as well as in dramatic performances. Irawati Karve’s *Yuganta* paved the way for such retellings. The mythical characters of the epics gradually began to shed their traditional garb to redress themselves with a newer cultural paradigm of equality. They questioned patriarchal power and in most of the works patriarchal figures are reduced to normal.

Deshpande, in her retelling turns the mythical characters upside down in order to question patriarchal values and masculine domination and as well as to endow her women characters with positive self-image. As myths have passed from one generation to another more in the oral tradition, they act as role models for people to emulate. Indian daughters are conditioned to incorporate the traits of Sita, Lakshmi, and Annapurna. As Deshpande points out, of the general assumption men have about an ideal woman is that, she should be ‘as pure as Sita, as beautiful as Lakshmi and as bountiful as Annapurna’ (84). The male counterparts of these Goddesses are regarded as unattainable ideals. Deshpande seeks to question this male construct of presenting women in extremes of ‘the blessed or the damned’ very much in the light of Ferguson’s anthology. Deshpande relates to the past, to find its meaning in the present. She draws her characters largely from the epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. She approximates myths to contemporary women’s experiences- her right to choice, her restrictions on liberty and resistance to cruelty both physical and mental. She states in *Writing from the Margin & other Essays* that she takes up the cause of the Indian woman for she feels like any one of us, ‘A world without frightened, dependent, trapped, frustrated women is a better world for us to live in.’(85)

“Hear Me Sanjaya” is one of the most moving stories by Deshpande. Nayantara Sahgal called for a detailed examination of epics by women as, “through such re-writing, new Sitas and Savitris will arise, stripped of false sanctity and crowned with the human virtue of courage. Then at last we will know why they did, what they did.” (The Virtuous women in Tribune 24 dec 1988/reproduced in ‘Point of view’ Prestige publishers.) As Deshpande lends voice to Kunti who emerges as a woman of substance contrary to the image of the silent sufferer attached to her. She accompanies King Dhritrashtra and Gandhari to the forest for three bear the burden of great loss and wish to renounce the world. They are also accompanied by Sanjay who narrated the entire happenings of the battlefield to Dhritrashtra. Strangely, he loses his voice and the relatively quiet Kunti finds courage to voice her feelings through this monologue. This character has been a synonym of sufferings in the epic-widowed young, she had to be a protective mother to five children, have had to decide to marry Draupadi to all the Pandavas and witness an array of deaths despite victory for her sons. Deshpande’s Kunti wonders how her identity was crashed. “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” (). Having been adopted she became Kunti, daughter of Kuntibhoj instead of Pritha. She also expresses her fear for the sight of a river, “The sound of a river makes me uneasy, it fills me with strange thoughts” as she had to abandon her first born Karna. Thus, Deshpande builds up Kunti’s character through the vital episodes of her life. Kunti becomes a significant character through this monologue. This Kunti is a strong person, almost hard-hearted. She justifies her act of marrying Draupadi to all the Pandavas as an act “To save the unity amongst the brothers”/She confesses in a very contemporary manner her dislike for Draupadi’s impatience, “When Draupadi came into our home I tried to tell her ... I thought she could take over my burdens. But she was never one to listen. She was so impatient, oh, so impetuous. I sometimes think that they do girls a great wrong when they pamper them and make much of them as children; they make them think they matter.” Deshpande’s Kunti is a woman who speaks to our hearts, whom we can understand, and sympathise with.

Amba and Sachi’s names are synonymous with Shakti that is power. Amba’s story is a third person narrative. Irvati Karve’s profound insights into the *Mahabharata* have been a source of inspiration for retelling mythology. Deshpande acknowledges the fact in her collection of essays (89). She states that the reading of Karve’s *Yuganta* triggered her imagination providing her with a fresh perspective. She found the characters ‘real and plausible’. Her query as to ‘where is the place of a real thinking, feeling woman fit in this agenda’ (89) finds expression in her stories. Like Karve, Deshpande also sets aside the passages believed to be interpolations. One example of the same is the omission of details about Amba’s rebirth as Shikhandi in the epic, which reinforces the fact that a woman was incapable of avenging her wrong doer on her own.

The story ‘Inner Rooms’ focuses on Amba who does not get much prominence in the *Mahabharata*. She is one of the three sisters who were abducted by Bhishma² as prospective

brides for his step-brother, king Vichitravirya. It was an accepted custom in the epic age. But the retelling is replete with questions directed at patriarchy and masculine code of conduct. It questions Bhishma's chivalry and with him concepts like 'honour, dishonour, right and wrong' (89) which men use in order to subjugate women. Amba's anger and disgust of the games men play and her despair at having become a pawn in their games find expression in the story. Questions related to the organizing of the Swayamwara also come up. Where is the woman's choice in marriage? Classical literature and history provide evidence of eight types of marriages in ancient India. They were Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, Prajapatya, Gandharva, Asura, Rakshasa and Paishacha³. Of these the first four were considered more respectable. But Gandharva and Rakshasa forms were also in practice. While the former was secret love unsanctified by mantras, the latter involved abduction and even bloodshed. The choice of a groom by a woman; that is Swayamwara is not mentioned as a type of marriage. It was a self-choice ceremony where a woman could choose her mate. Yet it was more of a formal custom prevalent amongst royalty, when suitors lined up to win the hand of the young woman. Sita and Draupadi's Swayamvara is more of a 'Virya shulka' that is bravery award for winning a contest. The selection of the lover could be publicly materialised in the Swayamwara ceremony as Damyanti did by selecting Nala⁴ or resorting to Gandharva Vivah (love marriage) as was materialised between Shakuntala and Dushyanta, subject of several narratives including *Abhigyan Shakuntalm* by Kalidasa. This intimates us with the broad-minded attitude of ancient Indian society in which women had the freedom to be in love with a person of her choice and marry him. However, customs like forced abduction was also prevalent which impinged the right of women as in this case. Amba's swayamwara along with her sisters Ambika and Ambalika was a total farce where the three were abducted by Bhishma, for his half- brother Vichitravirya, thereby thwarting her right to choose Salva as her groom. Salva, who was defeated by Bhishma in the battle which ensued immediately after the abduction ruled, that it would be dishonourable for him to marry Amba. In fact, he succumbed to orthodox conservative views. In the story the words 'honour, dishonour, right, wrong' reoccur prominently to emphasize ways by which men camouflage their real feelings. The retelling strips Bhishma off the glory attached to his sacrificial vow to remain unmarried. It sketches him as a "stuffed figure trapped inside other people's words and ideas" (87), a worse situation than women behind walls. The story brings to light the status of women "confined within the inner chambers, waiting upon husbands with the constant hope of bearing them sons" (88). This significantly varies from the account of the status of women in the Vedic age where women seemingly enjoyed freedom in social roles. It clearly implies that the status of women gradually deteriorated with the passage of time. The narrative asserts that women have always struggled for space. Amba's taste of freedom out in the open as against the confines of the inner rooms denotes her triumph of the struggle for personal space. Likewise her act of suicide is more of an act of defiance against the 'machinations and iniquitous rules fabricated by men exclusively for women' as stated by Hemang Desai. Amba ultimately, exercises her right to 'choose'. This she does by choosing death. She cannot control her life but she is able to control her death. This act of suicide may not be construed

as a cowardly act. It is an act of defiance. By asserting her right to choose, she inches towards freedom. The retelling brings her to the centre from the periphery and does not delve into the unrealistic facts about her rebirth for a woman faces all atrocities in one lifetime. Another contemporary writer Gita Hariharan's protagonist Devi, in the novel '*The Thousand Faces of Night*' sees the avenger aspect of Amba as more suitable to her own search for identity, as a contemporary woman with a free will to choose (40), despite the conditioning by the grandmother to adhere to the norms and accept subjugation at the hands of men or be prepared to suffer like the mythological Amba.

The subject-matter of 'Mirrors' is derived from a story from "Udyoga Parva" in the *Mahabharata*. It is narrated by Salva to Yudhisthira and Draupadi. Little significance can be attached to it in the epic except as a didactic tale on patience and forbearance and *Pativrata* (devoted Wife) dharma as foremost requirements for victory. However, a parallel can be drawn between the Sachi-Indra-Nahusha story and the Keechaka Vadha episode of Mahabharata. The Puranas record it with political overtones. Indra, King of the Heaven is dethroned, replaced by Nahusha who eventually loses Indra's position owing to his lust and arrogance. Sachi as a devoted wife resists Nahusha's advances and assisted by Indra and Brahaspati is able to bring about the downfall of Nahusha's regime. The narratives depict Indra as undergoing penance for a small wrong doing and gives Sachi little importance as her actions are directed by men, Brahaspati, the celestial Guru, Indra himself and finally the Saptarishis (Seven Sages). In the retelling, two female characters Indra's wife Sachi and Nahusha's wife emerge from the margin. The male figures lose their revered stature. An absolutely dehumanised God emerges in the story. Indra is sketched as a womaniser, seducer, unchivalrous and fearful human as against the archetypal known figure of the God as the ruler of heaven with dancing *apsaras* (celestial courtesans) at his service. Through Sachi, Deshpande sketches Indra in his true colours. The archetypal image of Indra as king of heaven is critiqued. She terms the *apsaras* as 'women at court' whom she thought of as his 'possessions'. Deshpande's Sachi presents Indra as an unfaithful, deceitful brute who ventures out every night to seduce, even rape women and returns with their body odours prompting questions in the readers' mind. Aren't there double standards for men and women in every society? 'No, a woman has no place in a story only as a devoted wife' (77), she remarks. The journey of self-discovery of Sachi includes questions on the idea of '*pativrata*', the devoted wife. Lascivious behaviour of men has never been questioned. What if Sachi sees the marks on Indra's body as marks of resistance by women? Amba had made herself a pawn in the game by men as she had invoked the very rules made by them. Sachi also makes herself a pawn by not resisting Indra's moves only to maintain her queenly status, shattered by the stand which Nahusha's queen adopts. The question of choice is woven beautifully into the fabric of the story. When there is a need to make a choice between womanhood and humanity, Nahusha's queen chooses the latter boldly in keeping with feminine strength. It is she who informs Sachi of Indra's hiding place knowing very well the consequence it might bear upon her own status as queen. This realisation prompts Sachi to

‘destroy the queen’ between herself and Nahusha’s wife. She gains a wider view of humanity. The real, thinking woman here also has foresight. She visualises that changes brought about by a revolution are illusory. Indra has been restored his throne but his attitude towards women will not change for one way of exercising authority over people is by subjugating women. Social change is immaterial; by finding her true self, Sachi has changed. Self –realisation is at the crux of her experience.

. Characters like Ahalya and Surpankha are viewed with an entirely new perspective. Women writers in regional languages too have used myths to take up the feminist perspective. Volga’s story titled ‘Reunion’ later reprinted as ‘Confluence’ is an example of absorbing feminist thought wherein the story functions to ‘share up constructions of gender in the past and to use it to subvert patriarchal agendas from a woman’s perspective as quoted in Paula Richman (31).

The Binding Vine by Deshpande features a character Mira very reminiscent of the archetypal legendary Mirabai. Like the legendary Mira, she is a poetess who dies prematurely during child birth after an unhappy, loveless marriage. Mira thus becomes the symbol of the woman on whom marriage is imposed. The practice of male prerogative in deciding on women’s lives against her wishes is questioned. The word honour again has specific meaning. Honour of the men too wrests with their women and can be violated by their conduct. That is a woman should abide by the social norms imposed to restrict her freedom. She should confine her activities to the ‘inner chambers’ and also be prepared to embrace death if the husband dies. By 2nd century AD. respectability of women as a free, thinking entity began to recede. Manu, in his treatise re-enforced the theme of women being unfit for freedom of any kind. Female sexuality hitherto became pertinent to the family, caste or community to which she belonged. This restricted women’s mobility and freedom. Deviation of any kind evoked harsh criticism such as excommunication or even death. Mira, the famous poetess of the Bhakti cult is seen as a revolutionary spirit by feminists. Kiran Nagarkar’s *Cuckold* brings out the story of Mira in a new light. As rightly pointed out by Ranjana Sahu ‘Nagarkar explores a society obsessed with the mythical standards of heroism and sacrifice it has set for itself’ detrimental towards womankind. The story of Mira presents a violation of the Rajput notion of honour. In keeping with it Mira should have had to confine herself to indoors and also embrace death through ‘Sati’ when her husband died. But she took one bold step after another. Her marriage remained unconsummated. She walked out of her palace and mixed with ordinary people and took to composing and singing. She did not confine to norms of behaviour of a woman as wife, widow and princess. She took a low caste devotee as Guru thus violating against all restrictive norms. Mira embodies resistance and protest. Deshpande’s Mira too leaves a diary and excerpts which are formidable discourse about women’s marginalisation thrust by cultural patterns. *The Binding Vine* projects the issue of resistance to patriarchal ideology. The protagonist Urmila is the voice of resistance in the novel that voices a protest against the patriarchal attitude to the issue of rape both in and out of marriage. Mira’s poems and diaries become a mode of resistance while the unconscious state of Kalpana emphasises the traditional silent suffering women have borne over the years.

Mira's poems change the archetypal image of the ideal divine couple Lakshmi-Narayan drawn from her own experience in life:

'But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too
Twist brocade tassels round her fingers
And tremble, fearing the coming
Of the dark- clouded, engulfing night?'(56)

The Binding Vine, questions man's right to crush a woman's artistic impulses. Venu advises Mira: "why do you need to write poetry? It is enough for a young woman like you to give birth to children. That is your poetry. Leave the other poetry to us men. This is the kind of subjugation Indian women are faced with. Her artistic impulses are crushed. Mira expresses her indignation about her name being changed. In fact the effort of Urmila to publish Mira's poems can be seen as an attempt at 'discovering the strangled voice articulating woman's silenced discourse, deciphering the coded language and liberating the imagination of woman from interior to exterior.' as stated in *Separate Worlds*. This clearly implies that Deshpande converts a muted woman to a "talking woman' whom the world can hear.

As Jasbir Jain observes, 'In the last few decades the re-interpretative act has been widely spread, thus emphasising the relationship between culture and self-image' (3). Mythology has had a huge effect on our modern-day society, and by learning more about it. It enables us to understand the world better, by knowing more of the origins of various things in society, especially in the area of popular culture. The retelling of myths facilitates a deep probe into the socio-cultural aspects of the period and at the same time questions society and its behaviour both past and present. It erodes religiosity and brings characters and situations into everyday life. In the retelling and reinterpreting of these myths there is a natural process of creation of new myths. We thus become protagonists of our 'mythical journey'. In other words, the retelling is a process which creates new myths arising from our passions, visions and experiences. Each time a myth is retold, it assumes a distinct characteristic. Myths subtly change with each retelling. They reflect the author's values, perspective and understanding of culture. The retelling thus is a wise story disguised as a narrative. Myths have fascinated women writers for they have been derived from texts which are essentially male constructs. Women emerge as protagonists who share their experiences as the writers retell their experiences.

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