
Shashi Deshpande's Treatment of Mythical Characters in her Short Stories

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Abstract

Indian mythology has been a rich source of inspiration for contemporary women writers writing in English. Shashi Deshpande is a literary voice who has redefined the traditional role of women with the help of myths. Myths form a large part of the human psyche. Indian myths have created role models for women. Strong feminist characters have long been the hallmark of Indian mythology. Shashi Deshpande has written a couple of stories based on characters, mostly women, from the epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Deshpande reinterprets history and myth. She has reinterpreted the stories of mythological women like Sita in 'The Day of Golden Deer', Draupadi in " And What Has Been Decided" and Kunti in 'Hear Me Sanjaya' giving them a liberated voice. These stories are a channel of psychological and moral analysis where Shashi Deshpande has emphasized the inner life, struggles and feelings which each of these characters underwent at that point of time. Kunti has been considered as the eternally silent mother of the Pandava brothers. Deshpande has given her voice to reveal her feelings to know reasons behind her actions. The story of Sita is presented with feminist version. Sita breaks the stereotype image of being an unquestioning wife. Deshpande rewrites the story of Draupadi and gives voice to her anguish of being cheated, of having become pawn by her husband, the Pandavas. Shashi Deshpande presents the stories from the myths differently by breaking the stereotypical images of the characters and gives them chance to articulate their own inner turmoil. The present paper is a modest attempt to explore the inner psyche of these mythological characters.

Keywords: Mythology, Stereotype, Inner Psyche, Reinterpretation.

Myths have fed the imaginations and souls of humans for thousands of years. The vast majority of these tales are just stories people have handed down through the ages. Indian mythology is one of the richest elements of Indian culture, which enriches it further and makes it a unique one in the world. It is very rich in terms of magical creatures, tales to tell and lesson to be learnt.

Modern short stories have used mythology to reinterpret and locate old and new meanings of human existence. In fact the rewriting of Indian epics is essential not because it highlights the other characters, but also because it gives us a well-rounded multi-dimensional view of the characters that constitute a significant portion of our culture and personalities. The epics are reinterpreted in a way that makes them less godly and more human. The narrative of the myths has changed, as universal journeys of characters are retold from individual's point of view. The characters are critiqued, scrutinized, story plots are questioned and connected with contemporary ideologies and issues.

Shashi Deshpande is the articulator of women who are caught at the cross-roads of change in a society which is undergoing the birth pangs of transition from tradition to modernity. Her short stories are imbued with myths. She uses mythical situations and characters in the modern context, thereby seeking to illuminate the predicament of contemporary women. However, to probe through the women characters of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata is an adventurous mythological journey for Deshpande.

Deshpande has questioned many paradigms present in mythology and has also shown the psychological turmoil of the mythological women through her stories. The story titled, *The Day of the Golden Deer* explores the feelings of Sita on her desertion by Rama. Sita has been the epitome of what an ideal Indian woman should be. Submissive, sacrificing and unquestioning loyalty are some of the popular ideals associated with Sita. She is known to the world as a dutiful wife who has submitted herself to her husband's will and endured her fate for his sake. But Shashi Deshpande portrays her as a normal woman who longs to live in peace by the side of her husband. Sita's feelings are clearly shown in these words, "I am no queen, only a woman who wants to live in peace with the man she loves, with the children of their love, instead"..1

The story begins with Lakshmana hesitantly revealing to the pregnant Sita about Rama's order for her exile into the forest.

Conversation between Sita & Lakshmana constitutes the essence of the story. Deshpande provides a chance to Sita & Lakshmana, her brother-in-law to have a brief conversation between them, in which Sita protests verbally the insincerity of her husband, Rama and his illusion. This Sita is a complete contrast to the epic Sita, who is an incarnate of patience and does not reveal her heart to her brother-in-law. Sita feels doubly exiled when she hears her husband doubting her and expecting her to pass one test of purity after another. Deshpande's heart pains on the strange and cruel injustice imposed on Sita. She says:

“ What stirred in me was the contrast between the young girl, whose innocence made this going away with her husband a joyous adventure and the woman, older, mature, soon to be a mother, once again getting ready for exile.” 2

What hurts Sita is that a trial once was not enough especially when Rama knew well that she was pure. She rationalizes the reasons for her sufferings. While Lakshmana blames the fate for all the unhappiness, Sita analyzes the causes for her wretched state-her love towards her husband.

“ It is not fate that shapes our lives, but our wills, our actions. It was not fate that left me unprotected that day, the day of the golden deer. It was my fault, the result of my weakness, the weakness of my great, of my too great a love for my husband. It was this that made a coward of me, making me afraid he had been hurt, it was this made me say those cruel words to Lakshmana.” (140) 3

She very well realizes that this time she will have to suffer because of her husband's weakness, his desire to be the perfect ruler. She knows,” he is still chasing it, the golden deer of perfection, which is nothing but a mirage, a delusion of.” (141).

Curiously, Sita is reminded of Vaali's unfair death at the hands of Rama. She questions Lakshmana about fairness of the action, who agrees that it was wrong but had to be done for her sake. The question that promptly comes to her mind is “And now this thing that he is doing to me for whose sake is this “ (136) and Lakshmana replies unhesitatingly,

“Why for his people.” (136) And then Sita asks Lakshmana, “ he is dutiful, I know that, Lakshmana, and righteous too. I never doubt that, but tell me this, Lakshmana, what happens to those who are crushed under the chariot of his righteousness?” (138)

Deshpande's Sita is a strong woman who is not willing to suffer just to please others. She, therefore, chooses to be silent and not plead with the King too absorbed in his own image. She no more wishes to be a queen, especially the queen of that king

who though may be supreme in the eyes of his people but is fickle in his mind, weak in spirit and non-resolute in commitments. She wishes to go back to being what she was. It does not mean that she has submitted, but she has forgiven him as he is a victim of his own idea of himself. Sita's self identity and individuality is understood from her words when she says "Perhaps I will forgive him, after all, not because I am virtuous or a devoted wife, not because I am good and merciful, not even for the sake of our shared life, our memories, tears and laughter, but because I pity him." (141)

Thus, by peeping inside the mind of Sita, Deshpande bestows her with flesh and blood and she suddenly becomes real and plausible any woman would be able to identify with. Deshpande deconstructs the ideals enveloping the Sita myth as she portrays her as an utterly devalued human being in a patriarchal society, in which a woman is of no consequence. Her Sita also remains silent like the Sita of mythology but the probe into her psyche has revealed that there is a reason behind her silence. She wishes to go back to being what she was. "The daughter of king Janaka. No, not even that. I am just Sita." (135) Even now, Sita wishes, if Rama himself had come to her, if he had told her why he was abandoning, if he had revealed his grief for doing this thing. Sita is very well aware that it has been duty that had been her rival ever since. Finally Sita gets ready to enter the forest once again with a will to fight: The demons of fear, hate, self pity and bitterness, yes, and anger too, Only when I have vanquished these will I emerge out of the forest of exile once more."(141) Undoubtedly, in The Ramayana Sita was not passive, rather she was making all along choices. Shashi Deshpande, in her introduction to Collected Stories Volume-II, too admits that she saw in Sita a dignity and courage that saved her from becoming a passive victim. It was her strength that kept the infatuated Ravana at bay.

Draupadi is another character from the Mahabharata who is looked at from a new perspective when Deshpande sets out on a fascinating journey of probing into the psyche of the mythological characters. Deshpande's. And what has been decided? Is the reconstructed story of Draupadi. She has given voice to Draupadi's anguish of being cheated, of having become pawn by her husbands, the Pandavas. The story is about the thirteen years of exile including the year of disguise. The Pandavas along with Krishna discuss for getting their rights. None of them now wants war. Lord Krishna becomes the messenger of peace and asks for at least five villages for Pandavas. At this decision, Draupadi fails to understand that why they are begging for what their right is. She does not want to reconcile at the price of honour. She has in her memory that how have Pandavas been cheated, insulted and humiliated in the court of Dhritashtra.

She memories the incident and the way she has been treated. She begged for help to save her chastity and purity in the royal court of Hastinapur. She also remembers the oaths taken by her husbands. Draupadi is shocked to know that all five Pandavas have forgotten the disgrace which was brought upon her.

She feels all these words are forgotten because she is a woman and this she cannot tolerate; “I thought that an oath is an oath, a promise is a promise .I imagined these things are meant to be kept . Whoever they are made to .I did not know that promises made to women mean so little that they are so light that they can be easily blown away.....as this.” 4

Draupadi’s agony and pain mirrors her helplessness. Krishna then convinces her and promises that her honour would be safe in his hands. Finally the king Yudhisthir reponds and says: “The Queen wants war and she will have it.”(245)

In the epic, the Mahabharata it seems that Draupadi is responsible for the horrible battle of Kurukshetra to avenge the wrong done to her. But Shashi Deshpande has renewed and reinterpreted the character of Draupadi to see the readers the other side of this. As per Deshpande the Pandavas had already decided to wage war, but they did not want to feel that they were responsible for the death of millions of soldiers. So they hatched this plan and let the words come out from Draupadi’s mouth. The Pandavas played the game of words and made Draupadi a pawn to them. They were successful in provoking the clever yet innocent Draupadi who could not read their motives. Draupadi terribly repents for she has provoked her husbands to wage the war. She stands still shivering, she hears voices from inside, speaking in different tones: “Strong sure of themselves. Businesslike:” She resists being held responsible for the epic war: (245). Why did they make me believe it is my decision, my doing: why:” The traditional picture of Draupadi is shattered and we find here a genuiue Draupadi who cries her heart out to every injustice done to her. She voices her resistance at being considered a commodity in marriage to be shared between the five Pandava brothers. It is a story of a young girl falling in love with Arjuna and eventually marrying him. She would have been very happy if she was allowed to marry only Arjuna. But the mother said that all five of them must share whatever they brought home. And so Draupadi became the wife of five men. No one even saw the woman in her, the woman hungry for love and for passion. Her grief lies in her words:

“I am Yudhistira’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.”(243)

Infact it a true picture of suffering wife. She feels deceived by Arjuna whom she has garlanded in svayamvara. She remarks:” It was a Brahmin youth I had garlanded and followed out of the svayamvara hall. I would have been satisfied to be the wife of that Brahmin boy, but that was not to be my destiny. I became the wife of five men, five princes, Kshatriyas.”(239)

She longed for Arjuna but he was always away from her. She married him to be his beloved but remained lonely forever. She admits that she was very jealous of Subhadra. She even thinks of asking Subhadra that, “How is it with him alone? How is it to know his desire for you is a friend not an enemy?” (244) Thus Draupadi of Deshpande’s story has raised questions to all in the assembly and given a meaning to the mythological character. She has raised a doubt about the position of women in India. She questions Dharamraj about the rule book and asks if it is the same for the men also? Thus she is genuine to herself and not just a myth.

By reinterreting the myth of Kunti in the story Hear me, Sanjaya, Shashi Deshpande brings out the sad truth about women characters of the epic Mahabharata. The story revolves around Kunti’s grief and disaster she faces in her life. Deshpande has lent voice to Kunti, the eternally silent mother of Pandava brothers. Kunti’s feelings and the reason behind her actions are revealed and given a voice when she takes a walk with Sanjaya, the charioteer of the blind king Dhritrashtra. The story is set in a time after the epic war is over and Dhritrashtra, Gandhari and Kunti leave for the forest after handing over the kingdom to the victorious Pandavas. The story is in the form of Kunti’s monologue and it was earlier titled “Kunti Uvachha” or “Kunti Speaks.” Incidentally, in the story, Kunti, who remained silent in the epic, speaks out her heart and mind and Sanjaya who spoke the most in the epic as he was entrusted with the task to narrate the war to the blind king Dhritrashtra becomes speechless in front of her.

The story covers the whole life of Kunti beginning from the time when, as a young child, she was given away to King Kunti Bhoja where she was given a new name, Kunti after the name, of the King. Her original name Pritha got lost in this transaction. She wonders, “My father gave me away how easily he gave me away. As if I was a bit of property cannot even remember if it made me angry. But I remember I was frightened.” 5

Shashi Deshpande tries to show what moved this woman who had to bear a multitude of disasters in her life, very silently.

Kunti had certainly wronged two persons in her life Karna and Draupadi. Kunti recollects her miserable condition of unmarried motherhood. Sage Durvasa gave Kunti a boon to invoke any God to bear a child. Curious, Kunti invoked Surya, the solar deity and bore a baby. Having given birth to Karna before her marriage, the young Kunti had no other choice but leave the child in a river. But till the day she saw that child as a grown up man she kept hearing the child's cries "that drowned the rounds of the river" (87). It was only after seeing him, she "stopped hearing the cries. As if the child had died at last. "(87) She called him, "My son "(87) but he never called her "Mother" (87), not once.

But after her marriage, the same got the approval of society. "I have no sons, my husband used to cry. He was frightened of going into the darkness like his father had, Kunti remembers" (P 87). Kunti's husband, Pandu could not produce a child due to his illness. At this juncture Kunti boldly established physical relationship with some gods as myth says, and gave three sons (Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjuna) to her husband.

Polygamy being the accepted custom in the monarchical set-up of good old days. Kunti is said to have welcomed Madri, King Pandu's second wife, as her younger sister. Kunti openly admits before Sanjya, "Do you know how unfair life is to a woman who does not have beauty,

Sanjaya the day they brought Madri home I knew I was not beautiful. Until then I had not known it, perhaps I had not thought about it at all. But after that, every day every moment of every day" (P 84).

There was a curse on Pandu that he would die as soon as he tried making love with any of his two wives. Forgetting his curse, Pandu engaged in marital bliss with Madri and the curse came into being and Pandu died. Madri decided to undergo the traditional ritual of Sati. As a result, the responsibility of raising five kids came to Kunti. In the story she also regrets that she was not even accorded the privilege to accompany her husband in his journey after life and it was Madri who accompanied King Pandu to heaven. At that time Kunti could not help but feel that Madri's "taking away all the glory leaving the struggle, the drudgery for me" (84). Infact Hear Me Sanjaya expresses Kunti's mental agony.

Kunti is even conscious of hurting Draupadi. Arjuna brought her home. Kunti tells him to share whatever it is with his five brothers. And thus Draupadi gets married to all the five. Kunti must have been a very hard woman to make the choice she made that day Kunti regrets this very much but felt that there was no other choice for her:

“I did her a great wrong She should have been the wife of the one man she loved Arjuna. She would have looked up to Yudhishthira like a father and Nakul and Sahadev they would have been her friendsBut what about Bhima then? No I did what I had to do I had no choice.” (85)

The Kunti of Deshpande is a woman who is genuine and has revealed her sorrow and agony for every decision which she had taken in her life. This new Kunti proves beyond doubt what a fallacy is to talk of women as the weaker sex. She is a woman who speaks to our hearts whom we can understand and sympathize with. By giving voice to these silent women characters, Deshpande has given them a new ease 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.” 6

Deshpande, too admits, “I don’t think the epics miss anything. It is we who have made stereotypes of characters and don’t see the human being in the person. I was freeing these characters from their stereotype casing, that’s all.” 7 To conclude the protagonists of these three short stories of Shashi Deshpande protest not merely to communicate their frustration or disagreement or grievance but they express their expectation for a change in the attitude of the society.

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