

Use of Myths and Stereotypes in the Novels of *Shashi Deshpande*

- Taniya Chakraborty, Joydeep Banerjee

Abstract: Myths form a very influencing effect on human mind in conceiving some stereotypical images. In India particularly the influence of ancient myths and archetypal images are immense on human psyche. Shashi Deshpande, an eminent voice in the field of Indian Writings in English, has dealt with the myths in a different way. This paper aims to snatch the attention towards Deshpande's unique style of representation of the popular myths of Indian culture in an altogether different approach. She has cultivated and explored the myths in three ways. First, she liberates the myths from the vague gender fallacy; secondly, she provides reinterpretation or reapplication of some popular myths in a different context and finally, she deconstructs some age-old concepts which have attained the stature of myths for many centuries.

Keywords: culture, cultural studies, Mahabharata, Myth, philosophy, Ramayana, sacrifice, stereotype.

In general terms a myth is a story or fable that acts as a symbolic guide or map of meaning and significance in the cosmos. In cultural studies the concept of a myth refers more to the naturalization of the connotative level of meaning, a use that somewhat is similar to the notion of ideology. Shashi Deshpande is an artful story teller. In her narrative technique myths are so adroitly intertwined with the story that one can't ignore their appeal. The stories in Indian mythology vary from subtle maxim conveying tales of Panchatantra and Jataka-tales to subtle life paradigm defining stories from the Bhagawat Gita, Ramayana and Mahabharata. In Deshpande's novels a monolithic shadow of Indian culture is immensely perceptible. Despite the fact that the Indian society that Deshpande describes is still guided by some hackneyed cultural discourses. But, simultaneously the Indian people are affected by some recent trends. The spread of Education, industrialization, globalization, westernization etc are some inevitable events which have changed the lives of the Indian people. Particularly the attitudes of the Indian women have gone under a sea- change. In modern age, Indian women are more eloquent about their 'self' than they were before. Deshpande has projected the women who are not the unearthly, irrational, meek, submissive and contemplative creatures whom we have found so far in Indian writing. Deshpande's protagonists are rational human beings whose thoughts and actions are progressive. Shashi Deshpande also like many other women novelists feels the need to explore the popular myths and stereotypes of Indian society. She deals with the issue in a very unique manner. She explores myths only from Indian mythology. These myths or legends serve as the instruments through which she carries her

message to her readers. She chooses Indian mythology deliberately because first, she belongs to India and the characters she portrays are also from this very origin; secondly, by relocating Indian myths in a changed socio-political scenario she wants to provide more humane and acceptable dimensions to these popular myths. Through these myths Deshpande not only presents the rich cultural heritage of her nation, but also the reinterpretation and relocation of myths help to enhance the credibility of Indian philosophy which is carried away through mythology. According to Deshpande, myths sustain the cultural heritage of the entire race and that is why they are disheveled with our lives. They help to assume the collective psyche or individual approach towards life. In her column Deshpande opines:

How we see ourselves collectively or individually depends greatly on myths. They are part of the human psyche, part of our cultural histories. (Web)

In her novels she presents India as a nation of rich cultural heritage to the rest of the world. India is not presented as an exotic nation with some hackneyed customs and rituals; rather, it is presented as a part of global exuberance. Deshpande rationally portrays how the myths and stereotype images influence in making the archetypal figures. She consciously depicts how a common Indian's life is preoccupied by the myths and stereotyped images. In India, myths are very much effective as people tremendously believe in them. For instance, one may find names like Ram, Laxman, Sita, Arjun, etc. bearing the legacy of the mythical figures. These are not mere names but, still very much living characters for every Indian. People give example of Ram-Laxman in describing a cordial relationship between two brothers; a happy married couple is often equated with Lakshmi-Narayan. Deshpande opines:

The myths continue to be a reference point for people in their daily lives and we have so internalized them that they are part of our psyche, part of our personal, religious and Indian identity. (Web)

Myths constitute the stereotype images of various phenomena. Specially the images of women in Indian society are modeled on the mythical women. A woman is expected to be as beautiful as Lakshmi, as virtuous as Draupadi, as dutiful and devoted as Sita, as loyal and faithful as Savitri, as bountiful a provider as Annapoorna, as strong as Durga and so on. Interestingly no man is expected to be a Ram or a Krishna, or an Arjun or a Lakshman. Women writers voice their protest against this differentiation between a man and a woman in the society. They have reinterpreted the popular myths with a completely different approach. Shashi Deshpande also worked on the myths. She has cultivated and explored the myths in three ways. First, she liberates the myths from the vague gender fallacy; secondly, she provides reinterpretation or reapplication of some popular myths in a different context and finally, she deconstructs some age-old concepts which have attained the stature of myths for many centuries. Deshpande expresses her concern over the general tendency of applying the myths only to the lives of men as they have been projected in most of the Indian myths. She feels, "myths should be liberated from the fallacy that they are relevant only to one sex because characters of that sex are portrayed." (Web) Deshpande uses the

myths irrespective of sex in order to describe the human predicament. The myths are such prominent landmarks for us by which we relate ourselves with the cultural ethnicity of the race. These myths provide the philosophical precepts in order to satisfy some existential queries. In “Dark Holds No Terrors”, Sarita's mother's loneliness is equated with Duryodhana's solitude after the battle of Kurukshetra. Through the story of the legendary hero Sarita's mother attains the revelation that every human being is basically alone. In “The Binding Vine”, Shakutai's predicament, her struggle for existence is equated with Abhimanyu's fight for escaping the chakravyuh. Urmi realizes whatever onslaughts the life offers, one has to bear until death. “You can never opt out, you can never lay it down, the burden of belonging to the human race.” (202) In “That Long Silence” almost the same philosophy is echoed. There Deshpande uses the myth of Dasharatha who killed an innocent young boy whose parents died crying out for their son. Later Dasharatha himself died calling his son's name, 'Rama, Rama'. Deshpande emphasizes on the divine justice through this myth. Man has to face his destiny. There is no escape. The protagonist Jaya feels herself in the same state as Dasharatha, the legendary king. In “A Matter of Time” Deshpande alludes to the myth of Yaksha in which he asked Yudhisthira about the greatest wonder of this world. Man's eternal existential quest is satiated in the answer. Yudhisthira said, “We see people die and yet we go on as if we are going to live forever” (133). This is the biggest riddle in life. Man is well aware of the earthly sufferings like pain, despair, sorrow, old age, loneliness and death, but he thinks, all these sufferings are not for him. He will be saved from the maladies. In “That Long Silence” again Deshpande gives allusion to the particular episode of Mahabharata where Krishna instilled courage and knowledge to a confused Arjun saying “*Yathechchasi tatha kuru*” (Do as you desire). (192) There are many options in life, but a person has to decide himself which option he would adopt. Jaya gets rejuvenated by this philosophy when she finds her life in a cul-de-sac. So, these are some instances how we relate our lives with the mythical heroes and find solace accordingly. Deshpande sometimes alludes to the myths and draws some affinity between past and present which seem to be ambiguous apparently. But, a minute observation might throw some light on the apparent vagueness. For example, we can cite the Dhruva myth of the Mahabharata which is retold by Deshpande in “The Dark Holds No Terrors”. The unloved child of King Uttanapada was pushed off from his father's lap by his step-brother. Being hurt as well as insulted Dhruva set forth a steadfast meditation and became the constant North Star. When Sarita's younger brother Dhruva died untimely in an accident, the readers are reminded of the Dhruva myth, particularly keeping in mind that modern Dhruva was also a victim of sibling jealousy.

The most interesting point is that the modern Dhruva also becomes constant in the guilt-conscious mind of her sister as she considers herself responsible for his death. Again, in “The Dark Holds No Terrors” when Sarita returns to her parental house after a long gap, the mythological story of Krishna- Sudama readily comes in her mind. In the Mahabharata needy, ragged Sudama came to Krishna, his childhood

friend, asking for help. At first reading it is quite difficult for general readers to draw the similarity between two incidents. Krishna and Sudama were friends from two different economic statuses whereas Sarita and her father share the blood relation. But, we have to consider the fact that it is not the persons or the relationship which is highlighted here. It is the situation, the intensity of the problem that is pointed out. Because both Sudama and Sarita went for help when there was no other way out. Deshpande reinterprets the popular myths in a different context. She opines that whatever archetypal images of women we have, are the creations of men. In the mythological books like the Mahabharata men were the main characters. So, the myths should be retold as the images of the women should be reinterpreted. How the mythical women would react in a completely changed ambience is obviously a significant query. Shashi Deshpande thinks: So if women are expected to behave like that today, it's very false because today's world is an altogether different world. (Thakur, 19) She is against of deifying godhood to them. Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, Arjun – all are human beings. So their predicaments should be interpreted according to the human natures. Jaya in "That Long Silence" equates herself with the mythical women like Sita, Savitri, Draupadi who followed their husbands in exile. Jaya also is bound to accompany her husband as she is expected to follow her husband. With a sarcastic attitude Jaya explains the predicament of the mythical heroines according to her own personal experience. She thinks, all those married women might have followed their respective husbands as they did not have any other way out. She thinks, "it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction." (12) Later Jaya equates herself with another mythical wife Gandhari who was called an ideal wife for her voluntary sacrifice of her vision for the sake of her blind husband. Jaya claims:

If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I didn't want to know anything. (61)

The sarcasm is prominent in these words. We don't know whether Gandhari was really satisfied with her sacrifice or not, but, Jaya became furious against her husband's activity. She feels no satisfaction to be blind to her husband's faults like Gandhari. Jaya even draws a stark contrast of attitudes between the mythical Maitreyee who renounced her husband's property with herself who makes herself complacent with her husband's affluence. Here also the mockery is carried out in her utterance,

Your life, Yajnavalkya told Maitreyee, will be like the life of anyone who owns property. Well, what more does one want? Immortality? What a crazy idea! (62)

Deshpande's point is not the similarity between the ancient woman and her modern counterpart. Her point is the difference between the two attitudes. Another mythical woman Shakuntala also gets justice to Urmi in "The Binding Vine". She considers Shakuntala as a "simple village girl" who becomes the prey of Dushyanta, the "classical city roué". (37) In "A Matter of Time" Deshpande retells the myth of Maitreyee and Yajnavalkya in describing the relationship between Sumitra and her

husband Gopal. When all in a sudden Gopal takes the decision to renunciate his family, Sumi does not restrict him. On the contrary, she prepares herself eligible for taking the responsibility of herself along with her three daughters. Like mythical Maitreyee, Sumitra also rejects her husband's property in order to pursue knowledge. The concept of knowledge is changed in a different ambience. Now it becomes the way of attaining selfhood. In this novel both Sumi and her mother Kalyani become Maitreyee in their quest for selfhood. Both of their husbands have renunciated the life of a commonplace householder. Both Sumi and Kalyani start their quest of their lives and in a temporal sense attain the eternal truth of life. Each mother is protective of her daughter. We did not find any deviation of this norm in Shashi Deshpande. The behaviours of some mothers are different obviously, but that does not mean at all that they are not protective of their daughters.

Deshpande portrays the protagonists of the myths in the background of modern socio-political scenario. She takes liberty to explain the actions of some mythical figures like Draupadi, Sita, Savitri or Arjun as the activity of any ordinary human individual of the day-to-day life. She uses the legendary story of Draupadi's taking disguise of a 'Sairandhri' or a queen's maid from Virat Parva of the Mahabharata with a different interpretation. Sumitra in "A Matter of Time" explains that Draupadi's life of a Queen's maid was a relief from the monotonous life of a wife of five husbands. It was a time of emancipation for her, a time to enjoy her selfhood, "to be by herself, to sleep alone, to be free, for a while, of her five husbands." (86) In India even a man's life is conditioned by social archetypes. In Indian society a man is often imaged as the protector, a manly and matured personality. But, there is obviously a deviation. Men also sometimes get tired of their duties which society has imposed on them. They find a way of relaxation, may be for a brief period, but, in this transient period they seek to restore the pleasure of life. Sumitra thinks the same situation might have been occurred in the life of Arjun, the third Pandava. This chivalrous warrior of the Mahabharata is famous for his valor and courage. In the Mahabharata he adopts the disguise of 'Brihannala', a eunuch. Sumitra thinks this activity of Arjun must be inspired to have some relief from his tedious life of a warrior. She explains the event with a different approach:

..Arjuna, tired of the male world of war and violence, of relating to woman only as lord and conqueror, became Brihannala, the eunuch, so that he could enter the gentle world of women, of music and dancing and become an insider in this world. (86)

Thus, the popular myths get another facet of interpretation which is simultaneously more humane in essence and reasonable as well as broadly acceptable in modern era. Deshpande breaks some stereotypes in her novels that have almost become myths by their use for a prolonged period of time. Such a stereotype image of a husband is 'a sheltering tree'. In India the status of a husband was immense from time immemorial. The lives of Indian women were restricted strictly within the territory of home. Therefore, they were completely dependent on their husbands.

Jaya's Vanitamami in 'That Long Silence' advised her to consider her husband as 'a sheltering tree', without which a woman's life is 'unprotected and 'vulnerable'. But, with the advancement of time the concept has been broken. Indian women are now stepping their feet outside their homes and so their financial dependence on their husbands has been declined to a large extent. In various novels by Deshpande the protagonists Sarita, Urmi, Madhu – all are economically independent. Even in the lower stratum of society Jeeja, Tara, Nayana, Shakuntala – all earn their livelihoods on their own effort. So, the concept which has been prevalent so far as “a husband is a sheltering tree” is not in vogue in present day Indian society. The second image that is shattered is the image of a mother. In Indian books, legends, even in films this figure has become a stereotype. By various ways of idolatry people sometimes forget that a mother is a human individual. She might have her own ways of reaction. She might not fit within the idealized concept of the archetypal mother figure. Deshpande wants to highlight this particular point in her novels. She thinks, motherhood itself is a myth that should be shattered. But, we consider 'motherhood' an experience, perhaps the most valuable and meaningful experience in any woman's life. It is not a mere concept that can be called a myth. The outcome of the experience obviously differs from person to person, but, how can an experience be conceptualized? In two novels, the experience of motherhood is described by the protagonists in two different ways. Urmi in “The Binding Vine” appears irritated with the expected roles of a mother. She reacts thus:

Sometimes I think ... they brainwash us into this motherhood thing. They make it seem so mystical and emotional when the truth is that it's all just a myth. They've told us so often and for so long that once you're a mother you have these feelings, that we think we do.
(76)

In another novel, “Small Remedies”, Madhu, the protagonist describes motherhood as the most exiting incident of her life. She recollects the birth of her child:

Motherhood takes over my life, it makes me over into an entirely different person. The in-control-of-herself Madhu is lost, gone forever. It's my baby's dependence that changes me; my place in the universe is marked out now. (183)

The contradiction of perspectives between two different persons proves the variety of expression from one person to another. So, this is not any 'myth' that Deshpande shatters actually; she deconstructs the general image of a mother as a soft, caring person, always ready to sacrifice herself for her family. On the contrary, Deshpande gives emphasis on the individual feelings and individual expression. Another image which is shattered in “The Binding Vine” is the image of a happily married couple. A happily married couple is often equated with the divine couple Lakshmi- Narayan. But, Mira in one of her poems shatters the happy concept of a married life. She asks:

But tell me, friend, did Laxmi too / twist brocade tassels round her

fingers and tremble, fearing the coming / of the dark-clouded,
engulfing night? (66)

Mira's personal bitter experience of an unwanted physical relationship spoils the ecstatic pleasures of a newly-married couple. She starts to hate the concept of love as her husband repeatedly utters "I love you" (67) in time of love-making. She is the representative of all those women who are bound to remain within the institution of marriage without their will, as divorce is still considered to be a nuisance in Indian society. Deshpande provides immense emphasis on individuality. That is why sometimes she describes some personal beliefs of her characters which are the expressions of the individual point of view. For example, Jaya considers love as a myth. She opines:

Often I had told myself: love is a myth, without which sex with the same person for a lifetime would be unendurable. (97)

Love is not a concept, it is a feeling. It depends entirely on a human being how would he react in different feelings like love, hatred, despair, jealousy, according to his mental condition. Jaya expresses her view in a mental condition when she is emotionally upset with her married life. Should a momentary personal decision be presented as an idea which is supposed to incorporate the entire ethnic group or a cult? Besides, according to the Indian philosophy love is a greater phenomenon than sex which is restricted within body. In India, love is considered to be independent of sex. Even Deshpande herself, in her various novels, has shown the dichotomy between love and sex. If the characters are considered to be the mouthpiece of the author, then such expressions may generate controversy which is not desirable. However, Deshpande's technique is unique as she concentrates her focus on the modern, educated, middle-class woman's struggle to find a balance between the traditional beliefs and individual needs. Though she equally considers the cases of both man and woman, women get a little privilege to her as she is a woman herself and she considers Indian women to be 'subordinate' in social status. Her endeavour is undoubtedly praiseworthy as she tries to catch the vein of the modern educated Indian women. She is writing back the suppressed history of the Indian women with a completely different perspective. Her endeavour is noteworthy in another sense. The rational approach in interpreting the myths would make them accessible to the common people. This can be viewed as the ushering in of a new dawn in the field of the Indian English Literature.

References :

- Deshpande, Shashi. "The Indian Woman – Stereotypes, Images and Realities." <http://www.ch.8m.cgi-bin/framed/1679/shashi.htm>. Web. 18 May 2011.
- ... *That Long Silence*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1989. Print.
- ... *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1990. Print.
- ... *The Binding Vine*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1993. Print.
- ... *Small Remedies*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000. Print.
- ... *Moving On*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2004. Print.
- ... *In The Country of Deceit*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2008. Print.
- Thakur, Pallavi. "Defining Feminism: An Interview with Shashi Deshpande." *The Quest* 17.2 (Dec 2003): 18-21. Print.

