



Relevance of ancient myths in contemporary marital domesticity : a study in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*

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Abstract

Myths are very important dimensions of cultural and literary experiences. In the modern age, they have become powerful instruments in the preservation of both history and culture. Literary works tends to create or recreate certain mythical narratives which human beings consider crucial to their understanding of the world. Though it surpasses the ordinary human world, traditional values in the form of Hindu scriptures dominate the minds of human beings even today. The scriptures emphasize fulfilling obligations of domesticity and make the man-woman partnership in marriage an indissoluble bond which continues even in contemporary lives. But the rationalization within Hindu moral philosophy at the level of "dharma" and "karma" works, interestingly, more to subdue and reconcile woman rather than man to her unavoidable marital domestic duty. Shashi Deshpande has carved a niche in Indian Writing in English as a novelist, short story writer and non-fiction prose writer. Deshpande limits her narrative universe to the issues nearer the domestic space. It is within this space women lies at the core of her novels. Her fictional world focuses on the contemporary urban women caught in the vortex of their socio-cultural existence attempting to resist the dominant scripture of Hindu mythology in their endeavour to establish their identity situated within the marital domesticity. This paper would throw light on Deshpande's use myths to show how they are deeply rooted in the psyche of the Indian people and their relevance in contemporary marital domesticity in her novel *That Long Silence*(1988).

Keywords: Internalization of myths, anti-women thrust, marital domesticity, feminism, tradition versus modernity.

1. Introduction

Myths are very important dimensions of cultural and literary experiences. In the modern age, they have become powerful instruments in the preservation of both history and culture. Originated from Greek word "mythos" myth has passed through various stages of explanation and interpretation. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* defines myth as a 'story', handed down from olden times, esp. concepts or beliefs about the early history of a race, explanations of natural events, such as the seasons. (Hornby,1983) Literary works tends to create or recreate certain narratives which human beings consider crucial to their understanding of the world.

Lawrence Coupe observes:

...the work of myth is to explain, to reconcile, to guide action or to legitimate. We can add that myth-making is evidently a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more or less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order, and the meaning of the individual's life. Both for society at large for the individual, this story-generating function seem irreplaceable. The individual finds meaning in his life by making of his life a story set within a larger social and cosmic story. (Coupe, 1992)

Barthes interprets myth as “depoliticized speech” that acts in close collaboration with ideology. For him, it is a system of communication and a mode of signification that functions within given historical limits and specific social conditions. It is useful to quote at some length Barthes’ articulation of the scenario:

What the world supplies to myth is a historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it, and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality. And just as bourgeois ideology is defined as the abandonment of the name “bourgeois”, myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things in it, things lose the memory that they once made. The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities between human actions, it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. (Barthes, 1972)

What myth does for Barthes, and for several other scholars who have elaborated the idea of myth as form of ideology, then, is to naturalise events and subject them to easy assimilation by the community. It empties reality of history and fills it out with nature. It is in this sense that myth becomes depoliticized speech.

Myths have a powerful role in the Indian socio-cultural life. Indian people relation with the tales from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* points out its contemporary relevance as a living tradition. The impact of the recent T.V serials prepared on the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have proved the still enthralling and all-captivating influence of Indian mythology and scriptures on the national psyche. Jung reiterates that myths “are present in every psyche forms which are unconscious but nonetheless active-living dispositions, ideas...that perform and continually influence our thoughts, feelings and actions.” (Jung, 2003) In India myths condition our ideas so greatly often it is difficult to disentangle the reality and our thoughts to a great extent, dictated by them. The scriptures emphasize fulfilling obligations of domesticity at the level of “dharma” and “karma” works, interestingly, more to subdue and reconcile woman rather than man to her unavoidable marital domestic duty. A wife must be a “pativrata”, loyal and sexually faithful to her husband who is her lord, a veritable deity. Justifying Manu’s laws,

Coomaraswamy says:

...husband and wife alike have parts to play; and it is from this point of view that we can best understand the meaning of Manu’s law, that a wife should look on her husband as a god, regardless of his personal merit or demerits...It is for her own sake and for the sake of the community, rather than for his alone, that life must be attuned to the eternal unity of Purusha and Prakriti. (Coomaraswamy, 1982)

Such a process of exploitation with anti-women thrust has proved extraordinarily powerful in post epic times and percolates even down to modern times. Jasbir Jain’s observation is relevant in which she states:

Myth marginalises women ...most religious myths are dominated by the concepts of dharma and karma, concepts which govern behavior of gods as much as they do of men. And both karma and dharma subordinate women to men. (Jain, 2002)

As a woman she is inculcated with the ideas of self-abnegation, of pride in patience, of the need to accept a lower status through the mythical models like Sita, Savithri and Gandhari. Following these models, often the Indian woman is passive and tries to conform to the given role as her destiny.

Shashi Deshpande is an artful story teller and in her narrative technique myths are so adroitly intertwined with the story. Deshpande reveals that marital domesticity provides one of the significant platforms on which the rooted collective meaning of the socio-cultural life of individuals is executed in the form of the demarcation of roles in man-woman relationship. Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* (1988) deals with a domestic crisis, which triggers off a process of retrospection and introspection. Jaya, an urban, middle-class woman exposed to liberal western ideas seeks to free herself from traditional ideas. In Indian marital domesticity for a wife the husband “is like a sheltering tree” without which “you’re dangerously unprotected and vulnerable.” Because the sheltering tree is essential for her security, it has to be kept “alive and flourishing” even if a wife have to “water it with deceit and lies”(TLS, 32). Caring for the husband is, thus, an indoctrination which is very hard to get rid of but which gives her patience and endurance with which one’s prescribed roles can be played. The novel makes

frequent references to Indian epics and archetypal characters like Sita, Draupadi and Gandhari.

2. Objectives

The proposed study would make an attempt to show the use of myths and stereotypes in Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* with an aim to focus on the construction of the women's position within marital domesticity. Though women and myths are at the core of Deshpande's fictional narrative but they appear to have received less critical attention than they deserve. This work would also make an effort to understand Deshpande as an artful story teller in the context of her novel and contribute to the expansion of her criticism.

3. Methodology

The paper employs key ideas drawn from Feminism that would provide the broader framework for the present study. The present study follows the interpretative analysis of the primary text and the investigation would mainly rely on secondary sources available.

4. Analysis and discussion

Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) is woven in the pattern of Satyavan-Savitri myth, but in a post modern context. Jaya begins her marital life in Dadar flat. Then she goes to a much better flat at Churchgate but later comes back to the same Dadar flat to escape the scandal of her husband, Mohan's malpractice: "I remember now that he had assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I. Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails..." (TLS,11). She had been brought up in a conventional family and content to follow the footsteps of the mythological role models. The difference in Deshpande's use of myth is the re-ordering of the meaning of these archetypes by interrogating them. Jaya's journey back to Dadar flat is symbolic of Savitri's journey to hell to bring back her husband. Like Savitri who follows her husband to hell, Jaya follows Mohan into hiding when he was facing a crisis. She equates herself with the mythical women like Sita and Savitri who followed their husbands. The Sita-Savithri myth generally represents ideal women, as Sudhir Kakar in *Feminine Identity in India* observes:

The ideal of womanhood incorporated by Sita is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which cannot be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband's rejections,

slights or thoughtlessness...In the Savithri myth, the ideal of devoted fidelity to one man takes on an added dimensions and categorical refinement. Exclusive devotion to one's husband becomes the prerequisite for the all important motherhood of sons...To be a good wife, is by definition, to be a good woman. (Kakar, 2002)

Jaya also bound to accompany her husband as she is expected and trying to conform to the pattern of an ideal wife by following her husband. With a sarcastic attitude Jaya explains the predicament of the mythical heroines according to her own personal experience. The ideal wife is trained in lessons to bandage her eyes tightly and meekly to deny herself the right to know anything. Jaya too equates herself with the 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 that "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". (TLS,61) These words indicate that Jaya is furious at her husband's activity and feels no satisfaction to be blind to her husband's faults like Gandhari. In the Indian scenario a woman is commonly seen as a submissive wife, dutiful daughter or as the doting mother. As Simone de Beauvoir says "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir,1952). Jaya is not born a woman but rather tries to become a woman. The social taboos associated with marriage and the Indian social setup in general makes her a woman. She says that she even "Snipped off bits" of herself to keep herself an ideal daughter, ideal wife, ideal mother, in short an ideal Indian female (TLS,7). When she was born her father named her 'Jaya', which means victory but after her marriage she is renamed as 'Suhasini', which means "a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman." (TLS,15-16). The former stands for a feminist figure and the latter symbolises 'angel in the house' stereotype. At her parental home she is given modern education instilling liberalised values in her but also inculcated in her the images of traditional ideal Hindu women. Now Jaya is caught in this dichotomy: one to live a traditional life of an ideal woman and another to opt for the life of a modern, independent and equal partner. The new role – lures her but the deep-rooted tradition in her does not allow her to give up the traditional values completely. Shashi Deshpande revert the Pativrata myth as Jaya is not

presented in this image. Though, she tries to be an ideal wife, she knows that the relation between Jaya and Mohan is like that of “a pair of bullocks yoked together” and she followed him only because “to go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?” (TLS, 12). Ironic inversion of myths, subtle appropriation of traditional practices and the new feministically loaded metaphors create radically semiotic subtexts where the socio-cultural pattern is subverted by radical thinking.

Marital life becomes a comedy of the grotesque wherein both the husband and the wife claim to be making supreme sacrifices for each other. But underneath their marital narrative of ostensible peace flows a growing lava of charges and frustration and anger which burst out of their “own special disaster” (TLS, 4) strikes and disturbs even the boredom of the unhappy pattern. Deshpande through the phrase “Those cosy smiling happy families in their gleaming homes... were the fairy tales wherein people live happily ever after” (TLS, 3) reflects the traditional assumptions regarding the marital life with a realization that such happiness is only mythical and fictional as it does not take place in real lived experience of individuals. During a post wedding game of the newly wedded couple one of Mohan’s relatives comments “the one who finds the coin first, rules the other at home” (TLS, 6). Jaya who finds the coin first, but she says it “means nothing” (TLS, 7). In Indian society it is always the husband who rules the house. But this myth of a dominating husband gets toppled when later in the novel Jaya opens the door ignoring Mohan’s extended hand for the keys. Later on she tries to explain that it was not because of Mohan’s reconciliation to failure but Jaya, refusing to conform to the image of ideal wife tries to be honest with herself and realise that “It was not he who has relinquished his authority, it was I who no longer conceded any authority to him” (TLS, 9) and this act, says Jaya, “was part of the same subtle resistance I had offered, the guerrilla warfare I had waged for many years” (TLS, 9).

The folktale of the sparrow and the crow is moulded in an interesting way into the novel. The story is that the sparrow builds her house of wax and the foolish crow builds a house of dung that melts away in the rain. The crow comes knocking at the sparrow’s door. The sparrow takes her time opening the door and the crow is let in and directed to the roasting pan to warm himself where he predictably perishes. She rejects “Suhasini”, the name given to her by her husband Mohan, when she has to equate Suhasini to

the sparrow in the story. Chandra Nisha Singh in *Radical Feminism and Women’s Writing* observes “The childhood story of the crow and the sparrow metaphorically brings home the complexities of man-woman relationship. The cautious, worldly-wise and shrewd sparrow kills the foolish and gullible crow and thus the crow, the male, becomes the victim and the sparrow, the female, the victor...[but] is not really victorious for she does not realize that safety is unattainable.” (Singh, 2007) Unlike the mythical character Maitreyee who was so sure of what she needed in her life and could therefore reject her philosopher husband’s offer of half his property Jaya says, “...I do not know what I want” (TLS, 25). Deshpande implies that a life built on externals tends to be hollow at the core. Maitreyee may aspire for nothing short of “immortality”, but Jaya is content just to live “and to know that at the end of the day my family and I are under a roof, safe” (TLS, 181). Jaya’s life was a continuous struggle to transform herself from Jaya to Suhasini, like the sparrow, who believed that it was best to “Stay at home, look after babies, keep out the rest of the world, and you are safe” (TLS, 17). But by the end of her long soul searching, Jaya realises that “Safety is always unattainable”. (TLS, 17)

The novel *That Long Silence*, which is full of minute details of domestic life, the hopes and dreams and the insignificant happenings, ends on a positive note. Jaya feels if Mohan is a sinner, then she too has to accept herself as one. She says, “there was a simple word I had to take into account: retribution” (TLS, 127). Dasarath killed an innocent young boy Shambuka whose parents died crying out for their son. And years later, Dasarath died too, calling out for his son ‘Rama Rama’” (TLS, 128). At last she realizes that she has to make a choice of her own to assert her individuality. Maitreyee made a choice of her own. The crisis in Jaya’s life has forced a whole lot of rethinking. And there is hope for a new beginning. She has decided to prepare herself for an overthrow of the oppressive dominant structures. Deshpande again give allusion to the particular episode of *Mahabharata* where Krishna instilled courage and knowledge to a confused Arjun saying “Yathechchasi kuru” (Do as you desire) (TLS, 192). There are many options in life, but a person has to decide himself which option he would adopt. Jaya get rejuvenated by this philosophy. So, these are some instances how we relate our lives with the mythical characters and find solace accordingly.

5. Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande’s wide reading and the

influence of Indian cultural myths and social conventions on her is revealed in her narrative. The writer makes ironic use of such ancient myths as her women though seem to refuse to follow the footsteps of the stereotypes but as Renuka Singh observes "...the mythological past becomes real and meaningful when it helps us to come to terms with forces be they benign or malignant, uncanny or familiar... Even if one wants to escape myths, it is difficult to ignore their significance as the sacred can re-emerge even in a secular age." (Singh,1990) As she says, it is not the rejection but only by recollecting and assimilating these myths positively, can liberation be possible for modern women. "We don't reject the ideals, but we know we can't approximate to these pictures of ideal womanhood. And we will not bear any guilt that we cannot do so. More important than knowing what we are not, is to know what we are, what is possible for

us." (Deshpande,2003). In Deshpande's novels women are all domesticated characters but they are ever questioning. This may also mean that she is a "revisionist questioning the adequacy of accepted conceptual scriptures." (Showalter,1985). She deconstructs the ideal male-devised mythological models to search and create what Chaman Nahal calls "replacement models." Elaborating on the term "replacement model" he writes:

It is very difficult to construct a replacement model. One cannot escape the myth-the conditioning myth with which one has grown up. Unless we construct new myths, we cannot construct replacement model. We all revere Sita and Savithri; they did something out of loyalty, out of dedication. We may not like it today, but can we disown them? We cannot escape the myths. So, the replacement models are to be constructed in the context of the myths we already have. (Nahal,1991)

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