

RELIVING MYTHOLOGY IN THE STORIES OF SHASHI DESHPANDE**Dr. Pratima Shah****Teaching Assistant, SVNIT, Surat.****Dr. (Prof.) Ami Upadhyay****Director, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Ahmedabad.**

The contemporary literature relives and reviews the ancient history, myth and legends. Mythological literature today has opened new vistas for the writers in recent time. The field of literature witnesses many writers- male & female who make the use of mythology by portraying the characters in all together a different light. The style & narrative technique through which Devdutt Patnaik, Amish Tripathi, Varsha Adalja, Shashi Deshpande & Chitra Divakaruni portray Sita, Draupadi, Mandodari, Amba & Kunti brings to the readers a different perspective of the life of these mythological personalities. Every character portrayed here occupies very importance place in our mythological scriptures through the struggle they faced, the life they lived and the message they stand for. Shashi Deshpande has penned down such mythological characters like of Amba, Kunti & Draupadi in her writings. The way these characters have responded to the patriarchal dominance and the biased gender roles is an integral part of most of the feminist literature today. No doubt the characters are chosen for the feminist theme with a reason that they are closer to Indian hearts and Indian readers. In these stories Deshpande portrays these characters speaking to their mind and soul. Their thoughts are not dominated by any social conditioning. In this paper, inner psyche of these characters is described that has a heart touching effect. The attempt here is to explore the feminist threads in the stories of Amba, Draupadi & Kunti while analyzing the patriarchal subordination & gender inequality they are subjected to. Deshpande succeeds in striking to the deepest chord of their life and helping them to vent out their fury towards the society that is ruled by patriarchy. Thus the paper throws light on how literature by Deshpande, with special reference to mythological characters as protagonists, reflects social and cultural reality of the present age.

Keywords: Mythology, Shashi Deshpande, Feminist Literature, Patriarchy.

Mythology and its characters have always been an integral part of the human psyche. They shape our thoughts to such an extent that we as humans are unable to mark a distinction

between the reality of what we imbibe and what we learn about ourselves through our myths. We as Indians are more connected to the mythological characters because they have portrayed various role models of a woman. According to myths, women are expected to be pure as Sita, loyal as Draupadi, beautiful as Laxmi, strong as Durga & devoted as Savitri. Anything against this is a matter of dishonour, a scornful event in our society. BUT the Indian society does not have role models for a man. Nor can we expect the men to be pious, loyal, devoted or virtuous. Shashi Deshpande has written stories which are women centred by portraying their inner sufferings, frustrations and disappointments in the life of her female heroes. The protagonists in her stories are in search of their identity where they seek fulfilment by probing into the existing problems of women.

In some of her stories, Deshpande has chosen the characters of our epics – The Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These epics have ancient stories which are as old as life. In these epics we find that the women do not have a voice of their own despite of their presence. Deshpande has given voice to such mythological characters and made an attempt to relive mythology through Amba in “The Inner Rooms”, Kunti in “Hear me Sanjaya”, Draupadi in “And What has been Decided & Sita in “The Day of the Golden Deer”. These stories are a channel of psychological & moral analysis where she has emphasized the inner life – struggles & feelings which each of these characters underwent at that point of time.

‘Hear me Sanjaya’ is a mythological story based on the life of Kunti. Deshpande has reinvented the whole story of Mahabharat and narrated it through Kunti’s perspective. In the Mahabharat we come across a Kunti who never expresses herself. She is a mystery to one and all. But Deshpande has portrayed her as a woman with a voice to express her sentiments and justify her actions. After the huge long war of Mahabharat, Kunti decides to accompany Dhridrashtra and Gandhari. Sanjaya the foreteller of the future and Vidur are also with them. It so happens that after the war Sanjaya is silent. He was the person who had brought the war live as a commentary before the blind king. Once when Sanjaya and Kunti are on a walk, Kunti speaks up. She expresses her life experiences and her decisions towards them. She even explains her actions. Kunti is a pivotal character in the epic. The story develops through her decisions.

She thus begins. She was Pritha, and is renamed Kunti after king Kuntibhoja adopts her but the

small Kunti in Deshpande's story tells Sanjaya that,

“my father gave me away--- how easily he gave me away. As if I was a bit of property, And I can't even remember if it made me angry? But I remember I was frightened. I thought my father had given me away to his friend because he was displeased with me, because I had done something wrong. And I thought—what if I displease this man too? Will he give me away to someone else? And so I did everything I could to please him, I tried hard, never to displease him.” (86)

Here we see Kunti portrayed in Deshpande's story as a person who is real. She complains to him that just because her father gave her away she was angry and hurt. She thought that it was due to displeasing her father, she gave him away and so she always kept it in her mind and never ever dared to displease Pandu, her husband. Kunti even tells Sanjaya about her first born child, Karna. She conceives him through the grace of God and then as she is a spinster she has to desert him in a basket by making him flow with the river. After many years of his birth, Karna an adult now comes before her. She wants to go to him and shower her love and blessings but Karna does not talk to her. She is craving to hear the word 'mother' from his mouth. But Karna leaves her in a tormenting agony and never utters the word 'mother'. Karna is angry with her for having deserted, but Kunti cannot tell him the reality of her miserable life. During those days it was acceptable for the kings to have more than one queen. Pandu had married Madri. Kunti tell Sanjaya, "Do you know how unfair life is to a woman who does not have beauty?" (84) Kunti is angered as Pandu married Madri and brought her in the palace as his second wife. Madri was beautiful compared to Kunti, and this humiliated her always. But still she had accepted Madri and showered her love and affection on her as if she were her younger sister. Just because Madri is a favorite of Pandu, he takes her with him in the jungle, Kunti is angry. Madri tells her to even look after Nakul and Sahadev. Kunti feels that how selfish of her to go and live with her husband and leave all the drudgery on me. It is not an easy task to raise five children single-handedly. And that too when you know that the other two are not your children but of the woman who took away your right of a wife. Madri escaped from all these responsibilities and was glorified in history.

“Take my sons, look after them, she said. And I was angry. She is escaping, I thought, she is taking away all the glory, leaving the struggle, the drudgery for me.” (84)

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. But her only aim was to keep their unity intact to win their kingdom Hastinapur. This way she feels guilty of having deprived Draupadi from her joyful bliss in marriage with Arjuna whom she loved. She showed everyone that she is strong and solid. But had she not been that, it would have been difficult for her to survive. Kunti is also angered at Gandhari because of her "futile vows." Gandhari had vowed to remain blind as the king Dhridrashtra her husband was blind. But this was a wrong decision of hers according to Kunti. She feels that instead Gandhari could have kept her eyes open and been the eyes for her husband. Had she done that it would have been altogether a different story. She criticizes the pitamaha Bhishma for his celibacy vows. She feels that history may hold him in a high position but he was a person who was a terror for her mother-in-law. These women Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika never held any importance in the family. Bhishma's had mistreated Amba due to which she killed herself vowing to take revenge in her next birth. The Kunti of Deshpande has spoken of their suffering,

“They rarely spoke, except to each other---and that only in whispers—and moved about so little and so silently it was hard to remember they were there.” (81)

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. She proves herself as a strong woman despite of every weakness in her. She remarks that women are not the weaker ones. They are the strong pillars that hold the family together despite all the pain and troubles given to them by their family and their destiny. Kunti gets genuine and touches the deepest chords of our hearts. She is portrayed as a new woman who is strong enough to take responsibility for every decision and at the same time even justify herself for the decisions taken by her. The

traditional image of Kunti has been broken by Deshpande and the Kunti who has broken her silence finds empathy of the readers.

"And What has been Decided?" is the reconstructed story of Draupadi. It tells us of her agony and highlights her pain as she was cheated and treated like a pawn by the Pandavas who were her husband. Deshpande has brought out the pain of a woman who had to marry five men and still be lonely forever without a companion. The Pandavas are discussing about what has to be done now. Should they reconcile with the Kauravas or should they wage a war against them? It seems evitable to Draupadi from their discussion that they have agreed for peace. Krishna has decided to go to Hastinapur and will demand five villages per Pandav. As we all know the real character of Draupadi from the Mahabharata that she was a rebel. On hearing all this she is angered. She questions them as to why do they beg for that which is their own? She even does not like the idea of reconciliation (Sandhi) with the Kauravas. She thinks that how could they make peace with the ones who dishonoured her? The Kauravas had even tyrannized the Pandavas in the past, how could they forget the bitter past? She is shocked to know that all five have forgotten the disgrace which was brought upon her. But Deshpande's Draupadi realizes soon that, "promises made to women, mean so little." (240) Deshpande's Draupadi constructs herself through revelations of her outrage in the form of narrating her pain and making us feel her suffering in poignant words.

Draupadi finds no answer to her questions. All are silent. This silence flares up her anger and she scolds them for being cowards and even says that Kshatriyas never behave like this. Krishna steps in between and calms her by assuring her that none of her husband will forget whatever was done to her. Sarcastically Draupadi tell him that it is difficult to trust them as they gambled her. They treated her as a commodity which they could use whenever they wanted. She became a pawn at the hands of Dharmraj, whom the world calls a righteous man, who never spoke wrong or did wrong. But still Draupadi tells him precisely,

"he did wrong when he gambled his wife away." (26) That day she was deeply hurt yet, "none of them came to me at the end of that terrible day. Not one of them even sent word to me." (240)

Finally Dharmraj Yudhisthir speaks up after a long discussion, "the Queen wants war and she will have it." (245) The story which we know as per the Mahabharata is that it is only because of Draupadi that the Pandavas waged a war against the Kauravas. But Deshpande has an altogether different outlook towards it. As per Deshpande the Pandavas had already decided to wage war, but they did not want all to feel that they were the ones responsible for the death of millions of soldiers. So they hatched this plan and let the words come out from Draupadi's mouth. And the moment Draupadi said it Yudhisthir declared that as she wants war we will have it. The Pandavas played the game of words and made Draupadi a pawn to them. They all were too eager for the war but not at the cost of their dignity. Both the parties had different motives related to the war. Pandavas wanted war to get back Hastinapur and Draupadi to avenge her dishonour. They were successful in provoking the clever yet innocent Draupadi who could not read their motives.

The pain and anguish of Queen Draupadi as a wife is also touching. During the years of exile Draupadi had fallen for Arjuna who had disguised himself as a Brahmin. She was content marrying the Brahmin. But on going to Kunti, Arjuna gets the order to share her with his brothers and poor Draupadi thinks,

"It was a Brahmin youth I had garlanded and followed out of the swayamvara corridor. 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)

The traditional picture of Draupadi is shattered and we find here a genuine Draupadi who cries her heart out to every injustice done to her. Deshpande's Draupadi has many questions to Yudhisthir and Arjuna specially. She had loved Arjuna like anything but never got his company. To get him for a few moments she had to bear with the other four also. In the bed she was never alone with Arjuna. It was always together with all five. As she was a woman and could not be cut like a fruit and shared with all others, Arjuna never came to her. She longed for him, for his love, but feels,

"Hungers that for me are never satisfied." (243)

She says that she was very jealous of Subhadra. She had the privilege to be alone in the bed with Arjuna. She even thinks of asking Subhadra that,

“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?” (244)

Thus we see in the story Draupadi who has crossed all barriers and raised all questions to all around her. Despite of having the Pandavas as her husband's she has no chemistry with anyone because she feels,

“I am Yudhisthir'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).

She longed for Arjuna but he was always away from her. She feels being mistreated by him and even blames him for cheating her. She married him to be his beloved but remained lonely forever. 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 Dharmaraj 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.

“The Inner Rooms” present the misery of Amba which leaves the readers speechless. The title suggests of the place where Bhishma kept all the women he abducted – a demonstration of patriarchal authority. The story has been written from Amba's perspective and portrays her utter disgust and anger at the games which were played by the men around her. Her despair at being a pawn in the hands of Bhishma is artistically given a voice by Deshpande. The three men Bhishma, Salva & Vichitravirya have rejected her and treated her cruelly. Bhishma for his oath, Salva in the fear of defeat and Vichitravirya for being humiliated. Unable to get free from the clutches of shame, Amba feels, “honour, dishonour, right, wrong – what are these but

words used by men to cover their real emotions?”(91) The pain she feels at this plight of her is reflected in these lines as she has nowhere to go, “Oh God, to be and not be seen; to speak and not be heard.”(92)

Amba once again felt like a child trapped in those inner rooms where the entire world had shut itself on her and her tears & complaints have no effect on anyone as none notice them. She decides to get free from those shackles of the inner rooms and leaves them. She is amazed to breathe the fresh air of freedom and bask in the happiness. She had never tasted this all her life. This was what she had yearned for and peace descends on her. There is a monologue where she tells herself that she has been foolish in letting her happiness be dependent on others. She feels pity for Ambika & Ambalika who are still there in the inner rooms and waiting for their husband to come to them at night. They live in a constant desire of bearing sons to Vichitravirya. Amba is happy that she did not have to face this disgrace. And during this introspection she takes a harsh decision of sacrificing the pawn – herself and put an end to this life which has to be lived on the basis of the rules. Amba asserts herself by taking this drastic step of sacrificing herself. The pathetic monologue is symbolic of the unchanged predicament of the women in our country and throws light on the reality that even the epics had disregarded the identity of a woman. Thus they have no other option except death. Amba’s does not die because she feels defeated, but because she thinks that, even if I am unable to control my life, I can bravely control my death. And thus she dies bravely by burning herself and her shrill cries full of anguish became the last tenuous link to the world and got silenced and finally “there was nothing left but silence” (94).

How can one forget the cruel injustice which was enforced on Sita in “The Day of the Golden Deer” where Deshpande has analyzed Sita through a kaleidoscopic view. The transition in the life of Sita between the two exiles, her suffering, her mistakes, the sacrifices & a new level of maturity she attains are portrayed poignantly by Deshpande. Sita reminisces on the day when she had come to Ayodhya with Rama as a bride. There were a lot of people along the way to the palace who were there just to have a glimpse of their king Rama. Rama turned to her with wide beaming smile. Sita now feels what a fool I was when I was young. The beaming smile on Ram’s face at that moment was telling her – Do you see how they love me? Do you hear them? (136) Sita now realizes that Rama at that moment was intoxicated with the wine of too much love and admiration of his subjects. She was shocked when he had killed Vali for her

sake. Now it had dawned upon her that the desire to be loved & admired had become a passion for Rama and that was the reason he had abandoned her – merely to please his people.

Sita ponders over her past and thinks how her life had been ruined by two persons who were very much alike in their passion. She had two experiences of agonising fear when she felt she would collapse. The first experience was of the golden deer when she was in the iron grip of the gentle looking hermit. The second experience is of now when Rama had taken the cruel & hurtful decision of abandoning her. Comparing the passion of both the men, she feels Ravana's passion was a simple one but Rama's passion was "to be always in the right, never do any wrong" is worse, (137) due to it Rama had asked her to prove her chastity. He was too much into his duties as a king and that led to the catastrophe in Sita's life. Rama's duty was her greatest rival. Sita abhors the word 'duty' since the day Rama asked her to prove herself chaste. She was grieved because Rama had taken pride in fulfilling his duty but was unmoved by his unkindness to her. Sita yearned for that moment when Rama would come to her and tell her the reason for abandoning her.

Sita feels that she has done no wrong. It is only Rama's fault. It is his weakness, his belief that he can never do any wrong – a desire to be right always in the eyes of his people. Sita's tears & reproaches are gasping for release and want to shout at Rama who abandons her – "I am innocent, I am blameless. How can you do this to me? I have your child in my womb" (135)

But she chose to endure & be a silent sufferer by suppressing herself. She hasn't submitted to him, but she forgives him as he is a victim of his own self image. She thinks that the day of the golden deer is over for me, "it is nothing but a mirage, a delusion" But Rama is still chasing the golden deer of perfection. (141) Silence pervades there as she gets prepared to enter the forest again in her life with a strong will. In the end of the story, Sita tells Lakshmana, "Tell my husband that he could have done something worse. He could have forgiven me" (142) Saying this, she enters the forest to face the long terrible years of her life.

Thus, all the four characters – Kunti, Draupadi, Amba & Sita have relived their lives in these stories of Deshpande and brought before the readers an altogether different persona of each one of them. The Classical Literature of India & its history find rejuvenation through these stories which are considered the most articulate & touching stories written by Deshpande.

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