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MYTHIFICATION AND THE DISCOURSE OF FEMININITY – A STUDY OF THE SELECTED
FICTIONS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

DEBABRATA SARDAR

Assistant Master of English

Uttarpara Govt. High School, Uttarpara, Hooghly, West Bengal, India



DEBABRATA
SARDAR

ABSTRACT

In a male dominated society women are prey to the politics of idealisation. Patriarchy has always been active in subordinating women through certain ways and this image formation is one of those many tricks that they follow to realise their aim easily. Image of an ideal woman with all her womanliness is nothing but a discourse. Shashi Deshpande in her fictions, besides dealing with other aspects in the life of educated, middle class Indian women has also pointed out how they are trapped in an idealised body and posture of women, and implies that it is primarily responsible for their dilemma and claustrophobia. Being swept away by the forces of this ideological invasion they even sometimes voluntarily identify themselves with the predefined image of an ideal woman. Deshpande holds the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of Indian myths equally responsible for this idealisation and subsequent marginalisation. She has also hinted well that a change in the cognitive level of women is perceivable, as with the awareness regarding this politics they start moving from their 'feminine' imitativeness to 'feminist' consciousness. With the help of some literary texts and critical theories, pertaining to both cultural studies and literary analysis this paper intends to deconstruct that subtle hegemonic power structure which works through the creation of an illusionary role model for women.

Key words: Politics, discourse, idealisation, mythification, femininity

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Considering the new cognitive domain provided by theory and research, it is too obvious to refuse that the concept of an ideal woman in a patriarchal society is the result of mythification, a discursive orientation. Recent analysis in the field of gender studies explores that crisscrossing region of schematic understanding which intends to mark this field of politics. Actually femininity as an idea is a consciously constructed discourse to which women feel inspired to conform. Elaine Showalter in her famous book *Towards A Feminist Poetics* has noticed three distinct phases - 'feminine' 'feminist' and 'female' in the journey of feminism as a social movement. In her postulation 'feminine' phase is characterised by women's response in

congruence with the image predefined by male fantasy. In the cognitive domain also women are made to accept certain things as being epistemologically true, while they are not actually impersonal or objective. The study also further proposes to assign an altogether distinct meaning to the apparently irresolvable dichotomy between 'sex' and 'gender' by deconstructing the prevalent gender notion in a male dominated society. With the dissemination of ideas by the theorists like, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Gayle Rubin, it becomes gradually clear that sex and gender are not synonymous but rather socially constructed discourse which contributes to sociological orientation of masculinity and femininity.

As a suitable corollary of these theoretical propagations, the writings of Nayantara Sahgal, kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and some others delineate that emerging tension immanent in the fabric of the society. Most of them deal with the ideas like suffering and subjugation, passivity and constriction, boredom and claustrophobia of women. Shashi Deshpande, in particular, while exhibiting similar concerns, deals with the fundamental question of the reason behind such discrimination. She is basically preoccupied with the inner world of women, their psychological complexity and upheavals in the mental world. Deshpande most impeccably has scrutinised the condition of women, the role they are made to play in the family in particular and society in general, and underlines the politics behind such marginalisation of women. She implies that women are barred from noticing what is actually happening to them and consequently they appropriate themselves with the conditions specified by male supremacy. Deshpande has even pointed out that, the image of an ideal woman both in appearance and in dedication is actually a myth created by male desire and an inordinate wish to enjoy unquestionable superiority. This typification, according to Deshpande, finds their association with and inspiration from the mythological plots and characters that to a large extent influence us and shapes the very ontology of our being.

Her short fictions, especially *The Story* serves as a primary proposition to deconstruct the myth of femininity and investigates the reason behind women's marginalisation to the strata of 'second sex'⁽¹⁾ in the social hierarchy. Under the garb of a simple story told by a grandmother to her granddaughter, the narrative intends to excavate a number of critical issues ranging from the transformation of the society from egalitarian principle and man's quest for immortality to women's role in fulfilling that quest by giving birth to and rearing up children and her consequent imprisonment into sedentary activities inside the house. She also shows how men out of their fantasy create an imaginary object of desire and try to find that object in every woman they come in contact with. In the section 'Afterward' annexed to the collection of her stories named *The Stone Women* Deshpande tells us how she was prompted to write *The Story* under the influence of the myth of Laxmi:

"I opened... the Kurma Avatara chapter (*The Bhagvat Purana*)⁽²⁾. About the churning of the ocean and of Lakshmi who arose out of it, so beautiful that 'everybody desired her, gods, demons, mortals.' The Perfect Woman. At the same time, the newspapers were full of yet another beauty contest, searching again for the Perfect Woman, with the perfect proportions. These came together in a story I called 'The Story'.

Deshpande here emphasises another very complex idea. She elaborates the reasons that were instrumental in leading women to be trapped into that predefined demeanour of femininity. She observes that the image of that ideal being that men look for in every woman inspires the female to blindly imitate 'Her physical beauty, her gentleness, her motherliness, her charm' (*The Story*). They feel encouraged to identify themselves with the image of that ideal being. What makes this politics of identification easier, is language. It is through this politics of language that this image formation and identification works. According to Deshpande, lexical items and their implications mean differently to men and women, "because the meaning of words have been built round the interests of men. Women, we need to remember, have not participated in the process of word-making"⁽³⁾ This ruse that is executed through the easy circulation of certain ideas at the basic level has also been emphasised by Amba in her another story, *The Inner Rooms*. Amba's observation –

"Words like honour, dishonour, right, wrong – they have all been put in the context of men's lives. What do they mean to me?" suggests this subtle trick that flows under the texture of our everyday life. In this regards the remark of the Kenyan writer Ngugiwa Thiong 'O in his book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Literature* is worth mentioning –

“Language carries culture and culture carries particularly through orature and literature the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and others”.

This politics of language is inextricably related to the concept of objective knowledge, because it is through this epistemological perspectives that people direct their behaviour and respond to others. Feminist philosophers like, Lorraine Daston, Donna Haraway, and Sandra Hardings have noticed that the concept of objective knowledge, though according to androcentric viewpoint goes beyond the constraints of individuality and attains some universal validity, is actually a construct, its implication being ‘view from nowhere’ is a discourse, consciously conceived and circulated through semantic invasion at the cognitive level. This biased tendency of objectivity deludes women and leads them to accept the androcentric orientation of ‘ideal woman’ as something that they should assume upon themselves. In her essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and Privilege of Partial Perspective* Donna Haraway has marked that traditional epistemological understanding leaves out women’s experience. She critiques it as the ‘law of father’. This ‘law of father’ is so pervasive that women in an essentially patriarchal framework fail to comprehend how and when they are trapped in the image of an ideal woman and put on a ‘feminine’ look to conform to that politically motivated process of identification and image formation. The grandmother in *The Story* tells her granddaughter that being driven by this enforced notion of femininity women began to think, they should “have bodies like these females (imaginary being), skin like them... smile like them.” Unknowingly the started to follow these laid down conditions as if without all those qualities they were incomplete and “they knew they could never please the men.” With much relevance Manpreet J. Singh in his book *Male Image, Female Gaze: Men in Shashi Deshpande’s Fiction* has pointed out that “the emphasis on ‘womanliness’ has induced in her a self-destructive narcissism. The desire to appear docile and angelic has led them to an infantilisation.”

The same idea has been reflected with a somewhat different approach in her another story *The Stone Women*. In the story a newly married couple went to a trip to the Chennakeshava Temple at Belur in Karnataka. The sculptures on the walls of the temple displaying “lush bodied, high breasted, dancing women’ cast a spell of wonder on the female protagonist. While her husband is grossly amazed by the appeal of those figures she grows introspective and feels a suffocating uneasiness. Her inner mind goes on thinking –

“It’s true, but it is not these details in the carvings that I find amazing, it’s what we are seeing here – the joyous, playful, narcissistic existence of these women. Were women ever like this? Could any woman have been like this?”

She finds a huge hiatus between the joyful mood of women carved on the walls of the temple and the actual state of women in the society. They are hardly so, as they are projected. Actually this is a conscious attempt by patriarchy to keep away women from realising their true state. They live in a world of illusion governed by male discourse. The protagonist of the story, the newly married woman is found to undergo great psychic change in the course of the story. She gradually moves from her initial conformity to the patronising behaviour of her husband and realizes that the idealised postures of the women on the walls of the temple are actually the result of mythification. It is only when her husband intends to become physically intimate with her - ‘his hands moving as if tracing the shape of my body’ - that the great, almost epiphanic realisation comes to her –

“This is how they must have looked, I think, the men who sculpted the women in stone, as they shaped them from their imagination...working out from their fantasies in it, creating women with unreal bodies, women who played and sang and danced all day.”

In her book *Short stories of Shashi Deshpande: A Feminist Interpretation* Ava Shukla Kaushik notices that the sudden realisation elevates her to another level of cognition and she starts wondering whether she was also turning into one of those many petrified women, being hammered by her husband into the shape he wants her to have. Deshpande in this story implies that women in reality are actually the imitation of the imagination of men regarding women and they play the role of ideal woman created by the figments of male imagination. In another context the protagonist becomes surprised to know that the queen used to dance for the gods. She is surprised not primarily because of the act of dancing but because of the ‘bizarre picture’ of a woman dancing in front of a ‘galaxy of gods lolling before her’ These gods are plausibly the gods of the male

and hence 'the king would not mind' when the queen would dance for the gods. In this context we can remember what Simone de Beauvoir remarked in her book *The Second Sex*:

"Women still dream through the dreams of men. Gods made by them are the gods they worship."

Thus Shashi Deshpande in her writings has shown that women in a patriarchal society are basically controlled and directed by male desire in such a politically motivated manner that women fall prey to it. She also says that behind this typification myths are also equally responsible as they are also somehow influenced by male discourse. In her seminal essay *The Indian Women – Myths, Stereotypes and Reality* she remarks that "To be pure as Sita, as loyal as Draupadi, as beautiful as Lakshmi, as bountiful a provider as Annapurna, as dogged in devotion as Savitri, as strong as Durga – these have become the ultimate role models for women". Therefore this politics of idealisation was there behind the creation of myths too. Women have always been typified in myth or in reality. We may notice that while women are made to be encouraged to follow the mythological figures of women as their role models, we hardly find any man aspiring to be either like Krishna or Rama or Arjuna. This politics works at such an intense level that the concept of heaven in all religions seems to be constructed with an aim to satisfy male desire. Every religion despite the diversity in their views seems to govern one homogeneous idea of heaven where the supreme male almighty is surrounded either by apsaras or nymphs or houris. Therefore, Fatima Mernissi in her writing, *Women in Muslim Paradise* ⁽⁴⁾ speaks of creating another paradise where women can be liberated from male gaze.

End Notes:

- (1) Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex* has pointed out that historically there has been one subject, man and therefore women are positioned in the second grade in social hierarchy.
- (2) Shashi Deshpande enjoys a great literary lineage as his father Sriranga was a Sanskrit scholar and famous Kannada playwright. It is this ambience that gave her an easy access to the vast oeuvre of Indian mythology. Once she curiously opened her father's copy of *Bhagvat Purana* and got attracted to the myths.
- (3) 'Afterword', the concluding section of her short story collection deals with Deshpande's views to myth vis a vis Indian women. In this section she points out the significant role that language plays to facilitate patriarchal discourse.
- (4) F. Mernissi is a Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist. A lecturer at the Mohammad V University she has written a number of books including *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Muslim Society*. The work cited is a booklet published in the year 1986.

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