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REVISIONIST MYTHMAKING AND CULTURAL NARRATIVES
SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *IN THE COUNTRY OF DECEIT*

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is one of the India's leading contemporary novelists. She writes about issues related to women. Man-woman relationship is one of the most important areas of interest in her novels. Love in all its forms is an important theme in her novels. Deshpande is equally interested in mythology. A perceptive reader of Deshpande novels is familiar with her use of cultural narratives as allusions, reference-points and embedded-narratives. One of her concerns is to address contemporary issues with the help of myths and legends. Her novel *In the Country of Deceit* (2008) deals with the themes of desire, adult-love and deceit. The novel is a revisionist mythmaking of king Yayati and his maid Sharmishtha's adulterous love-affair. This paper examines how Deshpande has employed cultural narratives: the legend of the Yayati-Devayani-Sharmishtha love-triangle from the Mahabharata. The Abhisarika nayika archetype from Bharatmuni's *Natya Shastra* and the Vamana tale from the Bhagwatpurana as reference-points in order to explore the protagonist Devayani's mindscape. Devayani, an unmarried woman, boldly chooses to explore her sexuality by seeking love outside marriage. She embarks upon an adulterous affair with Ashok Chinappa, a married man, knowing full well that their relationship is founded on deceit. *In the Country of Deceit* depicts a woman's uncompromising will to have her share of joys at any cost. The novel attempts to tell the 'other' side of the tale and defend the transgressive act of the mistress or the 'other' woman

Keywords: cultural narratives, revisionist mythmaking, myths and legends, archetype, 'other'

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INTRODUCTION

In her novel *In the Country of Deceit* Deshpande has used the technique of revisionist mythmaking to explore man-woman relationship from a fresh perspective—an illicit love-affair between a married man and an unmarried woman. Revisionist mythmaking is a technique of rewriting a myth, often from a feminist perspective, radically subverting the old story in such a way as to render the woman's experience which has

been ignored in the original, patriarchal version. The aim of revisionist rewriting of myths is to correct the incorrect gender imagery inherent in them.

In the Country of Deceit, is a skillfully structured novel. It is the tenth novel of Deshpande. Devayani is a young married woman living in a small town Rajnur in the state of Karnataka in India. She is just recovering from the loss of her mother and starting a new life. Devayani chooses to live alone in the small town of Rajnur after her parents' death, ignoring the gently voiced disapproval of her family and friends. Teaching English, creating a garden and making friends with Rani, a former actress who settles in the town with her husband and three children, Devayani's life is tranquil, imbued with a hard-won independence. Then she meets Ashok Chinappa, Rajnur's District Superintendent of Police, and they fall in love despite the fact that Ashok is much older, married, and-as both painfully acknowledge from the beginning-it is a relationship without a future.

Devayani, conventional and traditional in appearance, is actually a woman having unconventional ideas. She does not believe in marriage without love, nor has she any hesitation about living alone in a small town. Devayani wants to live life on her own terms. She longs for a moment of supreme happiness in life: "I want that, I thought, I want a needlepoint of extreme happiness, I want a moment in my life which will make me feel I am touching the sky" (*In the Country of Deceit* 24-25).

Devayani has given all her youthful years to her invalid mother Pushpa's care, and after the latter's death there is emptiness in her life. Pushpa suffered from epilepsy. As long as her husband lived, Pushpa had to bear the burden of his unhappiness. Her husband's life was a series of disappointments. Pushpa's last days were full of pain and suffering. Devayani has seen her parents' marriage which was a kind of compromise. She also knows that her father's death was not an accident but a suicide. Having witnessed her parents' anguish, she does not want to settle into a marriage of compromise. She rejects the marriage proposal sent to her by Sindhu who warns her that the Indian society permits marriage as the only option to a woman's bodily demands. Devayani wonders why her mother named her after a "stupid" (*ICD,36*) legendary queen who lived a loveless life. She has a foreboding that like the queen, she, too, would be unable to find true love.

Rani's mind is quietly preoccupied with memories of her film career as she thinks Devayani a wonderful character; smart, considerate, and formidably decorous. Devayani had been the accompanist to other people's lives but her own life is still alienated. As she contemplates that first she had been a follower of her spirited, beautiful older sister, then in charge of parents' lives and for a brief while she had acted for her cousin Kshama's helper and later she had been Sindhu's attendant after surgery. Now for the first time no one to think about. She had no one else to look after, no one to think about.

Shashi Deshpande has an extraordinary skill in portraying inner psychology to build a tale of beauty rather than cheating. Promises of a durable relation are neither made nor expected. In being together, the lovers find tenderness and understanding; apart, they do not exist in each other's functional world. Their ecstasy outweighs the pain of separation. The novel exquisitely captures fragile relations. Adultery is an ugly word that has been stripped of its ugliness. The novel signals to a larger entity but Shashi Deshpande doesn't think of it as big or small. She knows that love is a basic and universal human emotion.

Devayani completely identifies herself with the Abhisarika. Her moods match with those of the Abhisarika. At the same time it may be said that Devayani, like Radha, is pure despite her transgressive behavior. Devayani becomes an Abhisarika when she goes to meet Ashok for the first time. She chooses not to inform her actress-friend Rani with whom she has come to attend a wedding function at a countryside resort. She goes out in the early hours to avoid people's enquiring eyes. She walks stealthily so as not to draw attention towards her. It is her stealth and secretiveness bordering on dishonesty that takes Devayani to *the country of deceit*:

I walked past the closed doors in the silent corridors and, avoiding the lift, as if its sound would draw attention to me, I took the stairs down. . . . The road outside was empty, there was no one there. I stood still, blank, thinking, maybe it's not yet six. I hadn't looked at the

time, I didn't want to know, I had been like a gambler, thinking —let's see what happens. And now? What had happened? Had I lost? Or won? Then I saw him, leaning against his car, looking at me. (ICD, 128)

After this first passionate meeting, the two lovers meet again and again. The desire to be with Ashok makes Devayani bold enough to break the rules of propriety. While waiting for Ashok's clandestine visit to her home on a rainy night, Devayani compares herself with the Abhisarika who is so desperate to meet her lover Krishna that she is ready to compromise her honour:

And while I waited, I thought of the Abhisarika, . . . the woman going out secretly to meet her lover. A word with such a specific meaning. . . . A woman, veiled and frightened, walking stealthily in the night, trying to silence even the bells of her anklets. A woman so in love with a man that she is willing to brave a solitary walk in the night. Would I go out to meet Ashok? Impossible thought. And yet, if there was no other way of meeting him . . . ? (ICD 163)

Generally love is considered to be simple but really it is very complicated. The novel tells about the beauty, simplicity but also complication of love. For Devayani, her meeting with Ashok is natural, beautiful and yet very mysterious. Who can reveal the mystery of love? Devayani welcomes Ashok as a reality of her life, to enjoy the body of Ashok and her own body. For her, it is more than sex, she deserves to enjoy the beauty, sacredness, and sweet, taste of love. She walks on the wild side with her relationship with Ashok and that is the pivot of the story. She also realizes that her love with Ashok is temporary and in the end the novel peters out to an expected end without much bother. She has to come to a bitter decision to be apart from him. However wrong she has gone with Ashok, she keeps him in her memory:

pictures will remain intact in my memory. Pictures of Ashok's face looking at me, loving, wanting, enjoying me, Ashok kneeling before me, his face humble, supplicating, Ashok on the beach, holding out his arms out to me, Ashok folding me in his arms Must I forget his tenderness, the gentleness of his touch, the urgency of his passion. No , I don't want to forget, I want to remember: it is not remembering but forgetting that will be my greatest enemy. It is what my life is going to be like from now on- a constant struggle between trying to forget and wanting to remember? (ICD, 258-259)

Ashok Chinappa is in a highly visible post in this small town where everyone knows everyone else; Devayani is unmarried and lives alone. Yet there is a desperate madness in their relationship. They meet furtively but repeatedly: in the car, in a friend's house, even in her house one rainy night. Devayani feels that there is something sordid about meeting like this; but she cannot end it as both painfully acknowledge from the very beginning - it is a relationship without a future. She says silently in response to admonishments from her family, "there are no boundaries for love"(ICD,199)

According to Deshpande relationships are not something one decides on. They happen naturally, especially adult relationships, and one must know what the consequences are and take responsibility for it. It is very difficult to judge if adult love is good or bad. Human beings always crave for love, even in death a dying man wants to hold someone's hands. Love and relationships stir the storyteller in her. Deshpande tells about the relationship in her new novel *In the Country of Deceit*:

All my books are about are about relationship- particularly the new one, which is about love between an adult man and an adult woman. Most of my novels emphasize love because I am fascinated by the idea of love. Devayani, the protagonist of my new novel "IN the Country of Deceit", falls deeply and passionately in love" (*The Hindu, January 17th 2009*)

Like Austen again, Deshpande's novels are inhabited by many characters, all of whom are related to the central character. Uncles, aunts, cousins and friends- Sindhu, Keshav, Savi, Shree, Gundu, Asha, Tara, Kshama, Rani and, of course, Ashok, the married man Devayani eventually falls in love with. She becomes Ashok's mistress- his "girl"- and begins her long journey of guilt in the "country of deceit". Ashok is the stock Mills-and-Boon hero, tough but tender, whom Devayani typically resists but soon he becomes her "sun, moon

and stars". He visits her surreptitiously and showers her with love and passionate embraces, but Devayani cannot accept the role of a "whole" or a "floozy". She blurts out: "I must stop this. We can't go on. We must stop. I will stop I won't go on with this, I must tell Ashok I can't go on, I will tell him it's over" (ICD,162)

Shashi Deshpande projects Hindu Women who make open revolt against tradition, customs and male domination. Deshpande's women blame the duality and dubiousness of the moral standards that prevail in India. Woman's social fears and fear of failure and victimization are explored deeply in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. She has attempted to portray various faces of Indian womanhood and how ordinary Hindu women go through the ordeals of their daily lives. She focuses on how the 'Man made manacles' make their lives miserable. Her message is that in order to improve the living condition of women in India, women themselves should make attempts to stand on their own feet by getting educated and employed.

A bourgeois world of moral and ethical values in which Devayani has to distinguish between right and wrong is exposed. She does break off with Ashok finally but it is not clear whether it is a result of feeling cheap or because he does not tell her that he has been posted out of Rajnour. The narrator tells of her love story only on the last but one page of the novel when Devayani faces the reality of life and remorse on what she had done without the consent of the family members:

Why did I do it? Why did I enter the country of deceit? What took me into it? I hesitate to use the word love, but what other word is there? And yet, like the word atonement I kept hearing in Kashma's conversation. Though she never uttered it, the word love is too simple for the complicated emotions and responses that made me do what I had done. Ultimately, I did it because he was Ashok, because we met. That's all. Our meeting –it was a miracle, a disaster (ICD,257)

Deshpande's revisionist mythmaking of the legend of Yayati and Sharmishtha addresses the issue of men and women transgressing the rules of society in search of fulfilment. Deshpande puts up Devayani's case sensitively but objectively in order to reveal how personal fulfilment is neglected by the Indian women in their pursuit of playing various roles for the happiness of the family. Sexual gratification hardly comes anywhere in their list of priorities.

Through the novel, Deshpande depicts a woman's struggle to live life at her own terms and her endeavour to get her share of joys at any cost. She points out that woman must use her agency to do what she thinks is right. Yet, Deshpande avers that such illicit affairs tear women between ecstasy and guilt. Women get a brief happiness, that too at the cost of compromising their integrity towards their loved ones.

Devayani's story may be seen as the victory of a woman's essence over patriarchal constructs. Devayani chooses to opt out of an arranged marriage unlike many Indian women who lead unhappy lives in order to conform to society. Devayani has seen enough pain to be duped into such a settlement. Her quest for love and euphoria is fulfilled through a brief, yet passionate, affair although she has to pay a heavy price for it.

Deshpande's exploration of Devayani's psyche answers the question why women sometimes prefer illicit relationships over the socially accepted ones. It may be that such relationships provide them a brief glimpse of supreme happiness and fulfilment. However, as

Devayani herself finds out, such joys are ephemeral, and thus, meaningless. A woman has to pay a heavy price for indulging in an act of adultery. Society does not accept such transgressive behaviour of women. Women involved with married men are called home-breakers. Men like Ashok, however, have nothing to lose in the affair. It is their lust that makes them seduce innocent and lonely women like Devayani. Further, Ashok has his family and his daughter's love to fall back upon after his break-up with Devayani.

Devayani, however, has no such cushion. Society does not censure men for indulging in extra-marital affairs. Devayani herself comes to know that Rani's father-in-law, and even her own grandfather had mistresses. She feels cheap when Ashok gives her a present. After this, their affair goes downhill. Devayani finally makes a truly

empowering choice when she decides to break free of this adulterous affair which will give her neither security nor permanent happiness. Devayani's story shows how even morally upright women may make mistakes in their lives. Devayani's personal gain is at the cost of scandal and loss of social reputation. What is exemplary about Devayani is the way she cuts herself off the affair gracefully but resolutely. In the end, she has, like the Vamana, taken two giant steps: the first toward self-fulfillment, and the second, toward self empowerment

Conclusion

Devayani's preference for an affair with a married man to the security of marriage sets her apart from an average Indian woman. Her courage and conviction in falling in love and having physical relationship with a married man address issues deeper than ethical or moral ones. The very concepts of 'marriage', 'extra-marital relationship', and 'adultery' are patriarchal constructs. Deshpande takes a deconstructive approach in reinventing the love-story of a man and a woman. Through the novel Deshpande has contemporized the Yayati-Devayani- Sharmishtha legend by converging the focus upon the transgressive woman. It is the exploration of this norm-breaking and deviant behaviour of the protagonist, Devayani that contains debatable possibilities of women empowerment through the rewriting of the illicit love-affair motif from the Mahabharata.

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