

WHERE MYTH AND FOLKLORE BECOME CHARACTERS: AN ANALYSIS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S SELECTED NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

The paper proposes to study how myths and folklore have become an integral part of Shashi Deshpande's fictions. Two novels have been selected- *That Long Silence* and *A Matter of Time*. It studies how these allusions illuminate not only the characters but also the situations. It also looks into how these myths and folklore become characters in themselves at some point in these fictions. The writer adheres to the role of myths as potent cultural and social determinants.

In the novel *That Long Silence*, varieties of myths have been used. Some of them are the worship of *thulsi* plant for the longevity of husband's life, myths of Sita, Draupadi, Gandhari, Maitreyee, Savithri and so on. All these allusions present the protagonist. The folktale of sparrow and the crow building a wax house is an important allusion. The concepts of *Manusmriti* and other Indian epics are used to express certain politics.

In *A Matter of Time*, mythical characters of Sairandhri (Draupadi), Surpanakha, etc are used to critique the eulogized concepts of motherhood and wifehood and female sexuality. The ancient practice of Vanaprastha and the Buddha- Yashodhara episode have been drawn to elucidate upon familial relationships. Instance from *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad* also becomes crucial in the novel.

The novelist has effortlessly used myths irrespective of religion and boundaries. All these dismantle the homogenization of idealized concepts in Indian social milieu. By this, she not only bolsters the characters but also sustains the narrative and imparts depth and complexity to her work.

Myths are symbolic tales of the distant past that concern cosmogony and cosmology, may be connected to belief systems or rituals and may serve to direct social actions and values. Myths and folklore better and deeper understanding of the world order. According to M.H.Abrams:

In classical Greek, “mythos” signifies any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, myth is one story in a mythology- a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives.

Folktales are also the integral part of the cultural life of each and every community. According to M.H.Abrams, “if the hereditary story concerns supernatural beings who are not gods, and the story is not a part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale”.

Identity of the literature of a nation is exerted identity through the representation of its myths and folklore-directly or through its various revisions. The ever expanding study of myth, orality and folklore encodes deeper understandings of the world order, including people’s relationships within the social set up, with nature, with metaphysical entities and of the cosmic order. Folklore and community literature suggest the way in which human mind, various relationships within and outside the society function. . We now understand and discuss traditional myths and other such texts as emergent and intricately connected to performance situations or context.

Myths have become an important motif in feminist writing. Many women writers have sort to ancient myth that are recreated or revisited that shapes and offers a different worldview. Many feminists latch hopefully onto motifs in ancient myths that seem to indicate a possible past in which women had more agencies, perhaps even a central role in society. These so-called "matriarchal myths" give women hope that they need not be condemned to permanent status as second class citizens, for such was not always the case. It is at this juncture that the role of Shashi Deshpande as an Indian English writer draws our attention. Indian womanhood is powerfully projected through her use of myth and folklore. Her protagonists, who are middle-class educated married women, show no sanctity to rituals. Shashi Deshpande belongs to a transitional phase of tradition and modernity. In a sense her characters are rooted in tradition to a great extent. At the same time, they are moving towards complete emancipation. But their vicissitudes of life and the characters that come across their life make the intrusion of myths and folklore necessary.

The paper aims at finding out how the author has made use of myth and folklore in her two novels- *That Long Silence* and *A Matter of Time*. She re-interprets various myths and folklores in order to satisfy not only the situation, but it also throws light on certain characteristic features of the characters depicted in the novel. Sometimes, it illuminates the inner landscape of of women’s minds. According to A.S.Rao, “the post-modern texts move back and forth in terms of time-space reality depending on the situation. Such texts use myth both for mediations and subversions, accordingly, as they elevate or subvert the myths for delineation of truth”(10).

That Long Silence deals with a crisis in a middle class family, 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 Chauvinistic ideas such as the husband as a

“sheltering tree”. Moreover, into the texture of a novel supposedly about Jaya and Mohan, several tragedies of subordination are woven as though to form of a tapestry. And at the end of the novel, Jaya asks herself in honest self-doubt and self-evaluation the question: “but why am I making myself the heroine of this story?”

The novel makes frequent references to Indian epics and allusions to archetypal characters like Dasarath, Rama, Sita, Draupadi and Gandhari. Popular beliefs are also made use of occasionally, “tell lies now and you’ll be a lizard in your next life, steel things and you’ll be a dog, cheat people and you’ll be a snake” (128).

She had been brought up in a conventional family and content to follow the footsteps of the mythological role models. At one instance she tries to compare herself with Gandhari: “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 don’t want to know anything”(144). Mohan expects Jaya to follow him in his disgrace. They move to the Dadar flat to escape the scandal of his 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...” (11).

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 herself 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, she says:

I have a feeling that even if little boys can forget thi story, little girls never will. They will store this story in their subconscious, their unconscious or whatever and eventually they will become that damnably, insufferably priggish sparrow looking after their homes, their babies.. and to hell with the rest of the world. Stay at home, look after babies, keep out the rest of the world and you’re safe. The poor idiotic woman Suhasini believed in this. I know better now. I know that safety is always unattainable. You’re never safe”.(117)

Jaya’s self-analysis reveals her the fact that she lacked courage and the right of making a choice. When she is in this deep thinking, Maitreyee comes to her mind who so definitely rejected her philosopher husband Yajnavalkya’s offer of half his property- “Will this property give me immortality?, she asked him. “No”, he said and she immediately rejected the property. To know what you want I have been denied that.” Jaya says, “even now I do not know what I want”(25).

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”(127). “An act and retribution- they followed each other naturally and inevitably. 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’” (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. Sri Krishna told Arjuna in *Bhagavat Gita* that he himself had to make his choice- “*Yathechassi thatha kuru*”- “Do as you wish”. But now I understand. With this line after all those millions of words of instruction, Krishna confers

humanness on Arjuna. ‘I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire’ (192).

Shashi Deshpande’s *A Matter of Time*, interestingly traces the transformation of the ideology from the stage of the internalization of patriarchal values through awareness of the value of female bonding and self-identity to assertion of women’s rights. This is the only novel which has the distinction of having a male protagonist- Gopal. The novel also endeavours to trace the plight of the woman who shoulders the responsibility of the whole family when her husband leaves the house all on a sudden without uttering a word. Her Sumi’s parents Kayani and Shripati spend a long period of nearly thirty five years without speaking to each other. Four generations of women project four varieties of the ideology within the same family charting the course of social history and ideological change.

Sumi wasn’t conventional mother who worried about the rearing of her three girl children. Rather it was Gopal who carried out his duties to the babies that a mother was expected to do. Her difference is clear from the way she thought of Draupadi’s disguise as Sairandhri, the queen’s maid: “Don’t you think this was something she had often wanted, to be by herself, to sleep alone, to be free, for a while, of her five husbands?” (85). Her thoughts reflect her psyche- to be free, to be her own mistress and “not to have to share her bed every night with a husband”(86). Indian mythology depicts woman more as an absence than presence. Deshpande, though this instance, very interestingly manipulates the Indian myths to create a space for women to challenge the tradition of subservience. Her revision of the myth of Draupadi/Sairandhri of *The Mahabharata* uncovers new truths and possibilities related to female psychology because conventionally, it is believed that a married woman sans her husband is unhappy and incomplete. To quote Madhumalati Adhikari: “Deshpande through re-orientation of the myth suggests that a married woman may desire to enjoy an independent existence occasionally. Psychically, acceptance of the issue of mutual ‘otherness’ is not only a confirmation of present marital health but also a sign of future happiness” (137). Again, Sumi deconstructs and reconstructs the whole *Ramayana*, which is evident from her following thought:

If we are to construct a world, why not shape one with the hopelessness left out, why not end with the hope of happiness the promise of realization? Bhavabhuti reneged against the rules in his *Uttararamacharita*, he looked beyond the safe family portrait of Rama, Lakshmana and Sita, with Hanuman kneeling at their feet, and look what a tragedy he conjured up! (158)

After Gopal’s walking away, her creativity gets revived. She writes a play-‘The Gardener’s Son’ and proposes to write another. “It feels so good”, she admit, “and now suddenly I want to do so many things”(231). She also wanted to rewrite the story of Surpanakha from an original point of view:

Female sexuality. We’re ashamed of owning it, we can’t speak of it, not even to our own selves. But Surpanakha was not, she spoke of her desires, she flaunted them. And, therefore, were the men, unused to such women, frightened? Did they feel threatened by her? I think so. Suparnakha, neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it-it is his Suparnakha I’m going to write about (191).

The revision of the Surpanakha episode speaks of Sumi's eagerness to place man-woman relationships on sound, non-partisan footing and also of her modernity in thought.

Gopal's desertion can be considered as 'sanyasa' the fourth and final stage of 'asrama' in the Indian way of life. In this light, it can be considered that Gopal's desertion signifies the Vedic renunciation freeing himself of all bondage. The epigraph to the first section of the novel also seems to support this idea: " 'Maitreyi, said Yajnavalkya, 'Verily I am about to go forth from this state (of householder)' (Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad(II.4.1))" (qtd. *A Matter of Time* 1). But it cannot be considered as sanyasa in one sense because according to the Indian scriptures, a person could renounce his world only when he had discharged all his responsibilities towards his family.

One thing that strikes the reader is that there is a mutual understanding between Sumi and Gopal even about separation. Sumi never bothers him asking for reasons and he too understands perfectly that he could not have expected to inflict pain and not get it in return. This reminds us of one of the recent readings of the life of Buddha where his wife Yashodhara, clearly knew that he would leave the material life. It has been interpreted that she was the person who encouraged him to go forward along his selected path.

When Sumi comments on Sairandhri/Draupadi, Gopal thinks about his own condition through another mythical character Arjuna:

What about Arjuna becoming Brihannala? Yes, that was easy, 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 as insider in this world.(86)

Here also we see a point made by the novelist, that, including Gopal, people tend to adhere to the society and the sense of non-belonging frustrates them and they decide to depart. When Gopal realizes the flared up anger of his daughter Aru on his desertion of the family and her urge to set everything right, he comments:

When I was her age, I wanted to put the world right too. I was sure a revolution is the answer. Blow up all the baddies and all will be well. My father told me to read the story of Nahusha. I didn't know it then, I didn't even know it was in the *Mahabharatha*. I read it much later after my father's death and now I know why he wanted me to read it. It tells us that every revolution carries within it the seed of its own destruction. One oppression only replaces another. (214)

The striking feature of these novels is that both of them have in them some myths and concepts in common. Sita, Draupadi, Gandhari, Savitri who are known for the servile attitude towards the men folk around them are totally revisited. Let's see what some of the critics on Hindu mythology have commented on this. Rehana Ghadially says-

Philosophers, sages and theologians have at one time or another given attention to what a woman is. In a society where men have controlled knowledge and interpreted the classical texts, it is not surprising, as S.Ruth says, women have lost the power of naming, of explaining and defining for themselves the realities of their own experience.(21)

According to Susan Wadley: " The good wife saves her husband from death, follows him anywhere, proves her virtue, remains under his control and gives him her power"(32). It is

important to quote Sudhir Kakkar here: “ The popular epic (*Ramayana*) containing ideal models of familial bonds and social relations to which even a modernised Hindu pays lip service, however much he may privately question or reject them as irrelevant to the task of modern life”(52). Sita is considered to be the symbol of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which even her husband Rama could not destroy because of his rejections and thoughtlessness. It is also to be noted that the same epic provides us with a glimpse of the image of manliness in the Hindu society. Rama, is supposed to have all the traits of a hero and a God. But he is fragile, mistrustful and jealous and moreover a conformist, both to his parents’ wishes and their opinion. With all these trivialities in his character, the woman has to accept him as the ideal husband. The same happens to Draupadi in the *Mahabharatha* where her husband Dharmaputhra pawns her in gambling. She has to bear insult in front of all the courtiers, has to suffer it silently and also follow her husband through all ordeals in order to fulfil the duties of an ideal wife. Savitri is able to bring back her husband from Yama, the God of Death through her chaste and pure wifeness. All these mythologies have been injected into the depths of Indian culture which handicaps people like Jaya who wish to be free of all the cobwebs of burdening familial relationships.

In these novels there are occurrences of certain mythical rituals like circumambulation of tulsi plant for the longevity of husband, taking vratas and fasts for the same, etc. The use of quotations from sacred texts like *Dhammapada* and *Bhagavathgita*, position the condition of human beings in this world, especially in terms of individuals.

According to K.K.Sunalini, “Deshpande does not use myth and legend as embellishment or for local colour or ethnic appliqué-work”(39). To conclude, let me quote Eleazer M. Meletinsky- “Myth acts as the pattern for literature, and its metaphorical quality allows it to play the same role in literature as geometry does in painting, Frye argues that the metaphorical basis of myth is linked to the creative force of the symbol, and the semiotic aspect of myth is linked to its descriptive function.”(88)

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