

**SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *IN THE COUNTRY OF DECEIT*:
AN EXPLORATION OF DESIRE, DECEIT AND GUILT THROUGH
REVISIONIST MYTHMAKING AND CULTURAL NARRATIVES**

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's novel *In the Country of Deceit* 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 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: Ashtanayika, Archetype, jouissance, motif

Shashi Deshpande is one of the leading novelists of the contemporary times. 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 of her novels. Deshpande is equally interested in mythology. A discerning reader of Deshpande's 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. According to Jasbir Jain, Deshpande's novels "reuse mythical heritage, not in any philosophical heaviness, but through internalized beliefs" (40). Examining the use of mythology in Deshpande's novels, Shalmalee Palekar posits that Deshpande "engages in demythologizations of archetypes like Sita

and Savitri”(69). On a similar note, Surekha Dangwal, in her paper entitled “The Mythic Realism and Cultural Narratives in Shashi Deshpande’s Writings” observes, “through the use of Indian myth. . . she (Deshpande) is able to redefine the role of Indian women in present context” (Abstract). In the “Afterword” to her short-story collection *The Stone Women* Deshpande writes:

Myths are still important to us. We do not want to demolish them, we need them to live by; they have shaped our ideas for a great many years, they embody our dreams. To destroy them would be to leave a large dent in the fabric of our culture. On the other hand, if we are not able to make them meaningful to our lives, they will cease to survive. In India specially, myths have an extra-ordinary vitality, continuing to give people some truths about themselves, about the human condition. What women writers are doing today is not a rejection of the myths, but a meaningful and creative reinterpretation of them. We are looking for a fresh knowledge of ourselves in them, trying to discover what is relevant to our lives today.
(94)

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 narrates the doomed love-affair between an unmarried woman, Devayani and a married police officer, Ashok Chinappa. In the novel, Deshpande touches upon the themes of desire, guilt, deceit, adult-love and sexual relationship outside marriage. Devayani had earlier appeared as the protagonist of Deshpande’s suspense novel *Come Up and Be Dead*. Devayani decides to live alone in her newly built house in the small town of Rajnur. Her elder sister, Savi and brother-in-law, Shree, live in Delhi. Devayani’s aunt Sindhu has gone to stay with her daughter Tara in the USA. Devayani meets Ashok who takes a liking to her. Both embark upon a passionate affair. Ashok, however, is a married man and Devayani is aware of the fact that their relationship has no future. Eventually, she realises the futility of clinging on to Ashok. Her sister and aunt are shocked to know about the affair. Devayani and her actress friend, Rani, meet with a road-accident. Rani sustains heavy injuries leaving a distraught Devayani to pick up the threads of her life.

The protagonist and first-person narrator of the novel is a twenty-seven year old woman Devayani Mudhol. The novel begins with Devayani and her elder sister Savi rebuilding their old house in Rajnur. After the house-warming party, Devayani decides to live alone in the new house. She had lived all her life in Rajnur. Devayani spends her time giving tuitions to students. She is also translating a Kannada book based on the History of Rajnur.

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, a well-known Hindi film-actress, becomes friends with the reticent and self-conscious Devayani and they meet often. On hearing that hers is an unusual name, Devayani narrates to Rani the legend of her namesake Devayani from the Mahabharata:

I told her the story of the reckless, arrogant, stupid girl who thought that her father's position would get her what she wanted. Who fell in love, twice, with men who didn't want her and married the second man, a king, against his wishes. And then had to live knowing that the woman she hated most, the woman she had wanted to humiliate, was her husband's dearly loved mistress.

'So she got nothing?'

'Nothing. She was the queen, but it was the other woman, Sharmishta, who had the king, Yayati's, love.' (*ICD 36*)

The Legend of Devayani finds mention in the Mahabharata. Devayani was the daughter of Shukracharya, the preceptor of the demons. She first fell in love with Kacha, a virtuous youth and Brihaspati's son who had been sent to Shukracharya by the gods to learn the art of reviving the dead—the *Sanjeevani Vidya*. When Devayani proposed to Kacha, he turned down the offer saying that he was her 'guru brother'.

One day Devayani had a quarrel with her friend Sharmishtha, the daughter of Vrishparva, the king of demons. During the scuffle, Devayani accidentally fell into a well. King Yayati, who was on a hunting trip, rescued her. Devayani said that since Yayati had held her hand, he would have to marry her. A hesitant Yayati married Devayani. Still angry with Sharmishtha, Devayani wanted to have her revenge. She demanded that Sharmishtha accompany her to her new home as her chambermaid. To save her father's honour, Sharmishtha agreed to become Devayani's attendant.

Proud of her new position as queen, Devayani would get pleasure in tormenting Sharmishtha. In the meanwhile, Yayati was attracted to Sharmishtha and had an extra-marital affair with her. Sharmishtha bore Yayati a son named Puru. On hearing about Yayati's affair with Sharmishtha, Shukracharya became angry and cursed Yayati that he be afflicted with old age. Yayati, who had not had enough of worldly pleasures, asked his five sons to take his old age and give him their youth. While Devayani's four sons refused; Sharmishtha's son Puru gladly gave his youth to his father. Eventually, Yayati not only returned Puru's youth to him, but also appointed him his successor.

In the legend, Sharmishtha may be interpreted as the 'other woman' transgressing the norms and destroying Yayati and Devayani's marriage. She not only seduced Yayati but also deceived her friend and queen, Devayani. Sharmishtha's motives seem ambiguous and

questionable. However, the famous Marathi writer V. S. Khandekar in his Sahitya Akademi Award winning Marathi novel *Yayati: A Classic Tale of Lust* has extolled Sharmishtha as a forbearing, patient and steadfast woman. In his introduction to his novel Khandekar defends Sharmishtha and what she did in the following words:

I was unable to reconcile myself to the picture as drawn in mythology. Sarmishtha had made a great sacrifice for her community. A woman, who could go through the ordeal of being maid to Devayani who hated her, must undoubtedly be uncommon. It was impossible that such a person would try to entice Yayati for gratification of sex or that she would endear herself or earn his respect by a clandestine love affair.

. . . He (Yayati) must have found happiness beyond sex and lust from Sarmishtha. (6)

In her novel *In the Country of Deceit* Deshpande has appropriated the love-triangle motif from the Mahabharata and rewritten the story from the perspective of the ‘other woman’, Sharmishtha. The legend of Yayati, Devayani and Sharmishtha is charged with passion and is highly relevant in the present-day context because of its contemporariness. *In The Country of Deceit* presents the eternal love-triangle, the three vertices of which are husband (Yayati), wife (Devayani) and the ‘other woman’ (Sharmishtha).

Deshpande takes liberty with the legend by supplanting the legendary Devayani from the role of the wronged wife to that of the mistress. Deshpande has rewritten the story of the unfulfilled Devayani by using the technique of feminist revisionist mythmaking. By doing so, Deshpande redeems Devayani as a queen who spent a bitter and lonely life, and as a woman who loved twice and got nothing except apathy from both the men she had loved. At the same time, Deshpande has sensitively explored the psyche of the transgressive woman. The love-triangle in Deshpande’s novel has three vertices—Ashok Chinappa; his legally married wife; and Devayani, his mistress and the protagonist of the novel. The narrative focus of the novel, however, is on the illicit love-affair between Devayani and Ashok. Ashok’s wife is only mentioned in Ashok and Devayani’s conversations.

At a party organised by the actress, Rani, Devayani meets the Superintendent of Police, Rajnur, Ashok Chinappa who takes a fancy to her. Ashok is a married man and has a daughter. He is a very ambitious man and has a strong presence in Rajnur. Devayani’s placid world is disturbed when Ashok suddenly proposes to her. Devayani is frightened at this rude encroachment in her life. Yet, when she analyses her feelings, she realises “I am frightened, not of the man, but of myself, of my desire to run, not away from, but into his arms” (*ICD* 94). She knows from the very beginning that their relationship has no future. Still, she chooses an adulterous relationship over marriage. Why she makes this choice is difficult to understand. It may be her loneliness that makes her respond to Ashok’s overtures. It may be that a man of Ashok’s stature has never come in her life. Ashok’s honesty and directness impress Devayani. He promises her nothing except truth and honesty. When Ashok expresses his love for her, Devayani realises that she is quite ready for a relationship with him. Once she has accepted his offer, she knows that she has entered the country of deceit. She falls in love with Ashok breaking all societal norms and morals.

Deshpande has used the Abhisarika Nayika motif to depict love-smitten Devayani’s mindscape. The Abhisarika has been mentioned as one of the eight nayika (heroine) archetypes in Bharatmuni’s *Natya Shastra*. She has been described as a woman who, forsaking her modesty, has come out to meet her beloved at some rendezvous. She is a woman bold enough to brave the

night and other obstacles to unite with her lover (Wikipedia). The Abhisarika nayika archetype, with the central motif of transgressive behavior and the forsaking of modesty, fits Devayani's situation perfectly. Devayani's cousin Kshama, in her letter, describes a painting of Radha in her Abhisarika mood from the *Gita-Govinda*:

Everything is the same—the woman's figure, the trees, the flowers, the clouds, the sky. And yet it becomes an entirely different picture because of the mood. There is tension in the paintings where the Abhisarika is going to meet Krishna, contentment where they have met. (*ICD* 153)

Devayani completely identifies 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 behaviour. 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 at 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)

Devayani and Ashok give themselves passionately to each other. In these moments of love, Devayani lets herself be ruled by emotions rather than reason. In Ashok's company, she can envision exciting possibilities of adult love. Ashok feels drawn to Devayani due to an attraction deeper than mere bodily desire. He wants to protect and nurture her. He wants to give her love, pleasure and emotional support. He wants her to be happy. He shares his secrets with her. Devayani's vulnerability and simplicity attract Ashok. He avers that he cannot divorce his wife, yet he loves Devayani with all his heart. He, too knows, that their relationship is wrong. Devayani, who would not give herself in marriage, responds to Ashok's body with joy. The effortless intimacy between the two shows that they have some elemental affinity with each other. Her elemental responses to Ashok are of far greater significance than the social status of their relationship.

Devayani flowers in the relationship with Ashok. Ashok becomes an emotional anchor to her. It is this emotional fulfilment Devayani had been searching all the while. Having failed to find it in her family, she turns to Ashok. Devayani, who calls her own habits spinsterish, is surprisingly bold in making physical love with a stranger. Few, but passionate, moments snatched from Ashok's busy schedule enthrall Devayani. All the same, she is afraid at what she has done.

The affair, though illicit, liberates Devayani from the weight of the grief of her mother's death. She realises that after her mother's death, she had refrained from living and loving. The painful memories of her mother's last days had held Devayani back from enjoying life and also believing in love. Ashok's love opens the doors to self fulfilment she had closed on herself. It gives her a confidence which reflects in her new-found beauty and flamboyance. Almost everyone who knows her is taken by surprise at her radiance. Devayani, whom nobody would give a second look, gets noticed by everyone around her. A writer and Devayani's family-friend, Leslie calls her "a beautiful woman with her own unique style" (*ICD* 148). Devayani's friend Naseem points out that she looks as if she has been "brassoed" (*ICD* 148). With this fulfilment, however, comes the guilt of being an "adulteress" (*ICD* 148). Devayani shudders at the thought that someone might have sensed her secret: ". . . Does adultery show itself clearly to everyone?" (*ICD* 148).

Devayani enjoys Ashok's company but gradually, she longs to have him with her all the time. Living in society as they are, Devayani and Ashok have to live by the rules laid by it. Getting only snatches of Ashok's company makes Devayani realise the real value of the institution of marriage. She has experienced how and why the wife's status is far superior to that of the mistress or Abhisarika:

This is what marriage means: knowing that the years lie ahead of you, a long stretch of time waiting for you to occupy together. Taking time for granted, disjointed conversation about trifles, casual intimacies. This is what I want. I don't want clandestine meetings, drama, constant fears. The Abhisarika can keep her romance, she can have her excitement. I'll settle for small moments like these. This is what I want, this is what I'll never have. (*ICD* 191-92)

Devayani would not consider marrying anyone except Ashok. Ashok, on his part, cannot divorce his wife. Their relationship, thus, has no future. Devayani knows very well that she has let herself drift into a current of joy and bliss, but she cannot drift forever. She knows that guilt, deceit and pain are an inseparable part of such an affair.

The novel also deals with the theme of deceit. Deshpande converges her critical focus on deception of the loved ones as one of the fallouts of illicit relationships. Devayani, too, begins deceiving her loved ones—Savi, Shree, Sindhu and Keshav. She admits:

You sound happy, Sindhu had said. It's the rain, I said. I lied to her. Talking to Sindhu and Savi told me what had happened to me. I had entered the country of deceit. I could no longer be open and honest with people I loved; I had to deceive them. I was glad they were far away, these two women who loved me. If they were here, they would have known something had happened" (*ICD* 147).

Sindhu's letters and other innocent remarks from people around her continually remind Devayani that in the eyes of the society, she is a floozy, an adulteress and nothing more. Although, she nonchalantly brushes these thoughts away, Devayani cannot overlook that she is

deceiving her sister and aunt. When Sindhu decides to come to Devayani for a few weeks' visit, Devayani shamefully confesses that she does not want her aunt to visit her because in that case she will not be able to meet Ashok.

Devayani's relatives come to know about her illicit relationship. All of them are shocked and overwhelmed at what Devayani had done. They had thought of Devayani as an upright girl who could do no wrong. Savi berates Devayani for indulging in casual sex with a shrewd and experienced man. According to Savi, Devayani is interested only in sex and her relationship with Ashok is nothing beyond carnality. Devayani, however, is convinced that their relationship, though illegal, has the same spiritual sanctity as Savi and Shree's marriage. She asks her sister Savi, "Why? Male and female—it's the same, Savi" (ICD 185). It is Ashok's love that gives Devayani courage to question the societal norms that categorise love into moral and immoral.

Ultimately Devayani realises that adultery remains adultery and that pleasures of illicit love do not last long. It is a relationship swinging between euphoria and despair. She strengthens her resolve to call off the affair and toughens herself to break free of it. Like a surgeon, she cuts herself away from Ashok. Devayani knows full well that adultery is unethical as well as illegal. She also knows that the affair will not give complete fulfilment to her.

Devayani consoles herself with the thought that love is only an idea and that she will cherish her relationship with Ashok all her life. Devayani herself is deeply hurt by bringing the affair to an abrupt end, yet she knows that it was only Ashok who could have given her a glimpse of freedom, love and exhilaration. She asks of herself:

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? ... 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)

In the novel Deshpande has looked at love from different perspectives. As epigraphs of the novel, she has quoted A. K. Ramanujan: "A fantasy feast, / That's what love is", and J. Krishnamurti: "Love is not mere pleasure, a thing of memory, it is a state of intense vulnerability and beauty" (ICD n.p.). The novel deals with love that has nothing to do with constructs. Dwelling into the nature of love, Deshpande refers to Kalidasa's view that love is merely an idea (ICD 255). Devayani feels that love is not enough because even after having Ashok's love she is not completely happy. Again, the actress Rani mocks at the word 'love'.

On applying Annis Pratt's categorisation of the feminist archetypes, *In the Country of Deceit* can be discerned as a novel of Eros in which the female protagonist explores her sexuality by making bold, often transgressive, choices. Seen from the Indian ethos, Devayani's exploration of her sexuality is a bold decision. In a way, it may be said that Devayani makes a self-empowering, though highly subversive, choice of following her heart's conviction to seek an object that has a deeply personal meaning to her. Although it is the country of deceit that Devayani enters, yet it is also the country which is beyond the constructs or learned sets of behaviour and responses. It removes her from the world of patriarchal constructs of right versus wrong and moral versus immoral. Devayani's search points towards an ideal world where a woman's essence can be appreciated and understood. On a similar note, Liselotte Glage has called *In the Country of Deceit* a novel of jouissance (www.museindia.com).

Through this relationship, Devayani achieves a personal goal of enjoying the "needlepoint of extreme happiness" and the feeling of "touching the sky" (ICD 25) that she had

only longed for. In the end, Devayani cherishes the moments spent with Ashok and has no regrets about what she had lost. Like Lord Vishnu's Vamana incarnation, she has taken a giant step in the direction of self-fulfilment which she could never have achieved through marriage.

Deceit forms an important theme of the novel. In fact, all the three cultural narratives referred to in the novel by Deshpande have deceit as their central motif. The adulterous relationship of Yayati and Sharmishtha involves deceiving Yayati's wife, Devayani. The Abhisarika, in her stealth and subterfuge, points towards deception. The Vamana tale, again, foregrounds the deceptively small Vamana assuming gigantic proportions and taking two giant steps encompassing the Earth and the Heaven. Incidentally, the sub-plot of the novel, which revolves around a piece of land that belonged to Devayani's mother Pushpa, too, is based on the theme of deceit. The local land-mafia is on a lookout of grabbing the plot, which after Pushpa's death, belongs to Devayani and Savi. The sub-plot, however, remains unresolved.

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 women must use her agency to do what they think 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 the 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-fulfilment, and the second, toward self-empowerment.

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 contemporised 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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