

UNSCATHED IN “THE COUNTRY OF DECEIT”

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Writing was considered as unfeminine in 18th century. Denouncing creative writing by women in 1850, G.H. Lewes in his poem, *A Gentle Hint to Writing Women* wrote:

Are there no husbands, lovers, brothers, friends to cuddle and console?
Are there no stockings to darn, no purses to make, no braces to embroider?
My idea of a perfect woman is one who can write but won't. (Lewes 189)

Several years later in a famous letter to Charlotte Bronte, Robert Southey rephrased the same notion, “Literature is not the business of women’s life and it cannot be.” (Southey Web.) Several reasons could be assigned as a reason for considering the pen to be a tool of men. The superiority complex of men kept him from accepting a female as a thinking entity. He labeled her as a being devoid of all reasoning and logic. He knew fully well that her artistic pursuit would transform a defenseless dishwasher and maid into thinking, independent and flourishing artist.

All this while, when patriarchy was bent upon silencing women and snatching away their pens, women kept asserting their right of expression. She had so much to say -she resorted to talking to the moon and stars. These years of creative urges seething within taught women to observe the world around them. They became acutely conscious of the patriarchy that was relentlessly driving them to the margins.

Women were mere playthings in the hands of patriarchy. They were no more than sex objects and were exploited physically, mentally and emotionally. Women were suppressed so that men could become more powerful. Women were portrayed thus:

A woman is a worthy thyng
They do the wash and do the wrynge...
A woman is a worthy wyght
She serveth a man daye and nyght. (Ruthven 73)

Women were declared to be inferior beings. K.K.Ruthven observed:

Woman is not an essence but a construct in the domain of patriarchal culture, a dispersed subject, historically variable, socially feminized, and a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires get enacted. (Ruthven 45)

In their attempt at becoming outstanding authors, many female novelists started by trying to understand men. They tried to look at themselves from a male perspective. They had

to realise how men saw them before they could change this view on women. To their disdain they realised that they were no more than unnatural (but seductive) monsters—deviant, excluded, powerless and angry.

Nevertheless, women wrote and felt good about their sex. They realised that they had a story of their own to share. They desperately wanted their own emotions, circumstances, frustrations and desires shared and given a literary form. They wanted to lead a meaningful existence, to show that their sufferings were imposed and unnecessary. They became determined to resist and remake their own lives.

Male narratives were invariably fraught with adventure, project, enterprise and conquest. For a woman, writing was:

...the fulfillment of desires, telling becomes the single predicated act as if to tell were to resolve, to provide closure... a plot behind women's 'plotless' narrative, the additional plot of sharing an experience so that the listener's life may complete the writer's tale. (Lanser 624-625)

A woman's narratives are never simple or linear. They are not objectified or generalized either. They wield their pens with a flourish to weave their non-simple, non-linear, non-objectified and non-generalized tales. Innate feminine circularity refuses to adhere to linearity. Virginia Woolf acknowledged that women do not write about men. She observed:

Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. (Woolf)

When women do write about men, it is rarely about the handsome, charming prince that patriarchy had tutored her to dream of. She had suffered at their hands and she knows him in and out.

Women writers have flouted all rules of silence and raised their strong voices to question patriarchy. This is akin to cataclysm. Literature written by women dares to be optimistic. It dares to speak of love and compassion. It is a literature that is not afraid of colloquial language. It is fraught with sentimentality and it searches a spiritual dimension of reality—a reality that accepts the unknown and the unexplainable. Literature written by women frames no answers but is full to the brim with questions. It does not mutilate or invent history. It seeks knowledge through feelings and emotions.

In an interview given to IANS, Shashi Deshpande clarified that her novels are about relationships, particularly the novel—*The Country of Deceit*:

...is about love between an adult man and an adult woman... Devayani the protagonist falls deeply and passionately in love... 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... (The Hindustan Times)

In the same interview, the author laid down:

My novel is about adult love. Devayani, the protagonist, who chooses to live alone in the town of Rajnaur after her parent's death, falls in love with the town's new district superintendent of Police, Ashok Chinappa, who is much married and – as both acknowledge from the very beginning—it is a

relationship without a future... In my book, the first thing the man tries to tell the woman is that I promise you nothing. But I stand outside your gate and cannot get you out of my mind. I think that's the real sign of love...
(The Hindustan Times)

Shashi Deshpande's novels are cherished as she relates stories of the daily lives of women. She possesses the ability to record and celebrate the multi-layered richness of relationships with family and friends. Her tightly focussed, compelling narratives are never about men. All her protagonists are women, suffering at the hands of men. Women, who do not think of severing ties in spite of all turmoil, but calmly face it all calmly. Somewhere, she is aware that her strength has given her the ability to forgive and move on. She is not weak but she withdraws because she knows that the men in and around her life are too weak to accept defeat. They need to feel that they are always right. This false belief is their source of sustenance.

Devayani in Shashi Deshpande's *In the Country of Deceit* chooses to live alone in the small town of Rajnaur after her parents' death, ignoring the gently voiced disapproval of her family and friends. Teaching English, creating a garden and making friends with the other residents, Devayani leads a tranquil life. Then she meets Ashok Chinappa, Rajnaur's new 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 very beginning—it is a relationship without a future.

Deshpande's unblinking gaze relates the sufferings, evasions and lies that overtake those caught in the web of subterfuge. In this country of deceit, there are no hostages or victors—only scarred lives. Yet a man and a woman feel differently. Devayani contemplates:

...What if I tell you what it is that I desire, what I want? What if I say—give me your love, give me your life, give me all the time you have on this earth? Will you give me these things? But I knew I would never say the words to him, I would never have any of these. He loved me, but he also had his ambition, his work, his dreams of a future life. And, threaded through the design of his life was the strong strand of his love for his daughter, a thread that linked him, whether he liked it or not, to his wife. Love was not enough, no, it was never enough. (Deshpande 210)

Women are often portrayed as one craving for attention and love in fiction penned down by men. But, women are sensible enough to realise that love is never enough in real life. They long for a long lasting relationship that exudes stability and a sense of security. Women, on the other hand, know that men do not care about permanence in a relationship. Sex is sufficient. Momentary pleasure is what they seek. Ashok confessed:

...The first time I saw you, it was your face, the way you looked... I may sound like a fool, but I felt I had found something I had been looking for all my life. You're my Divya, you're my love. I've had other women, yes, I admit it, but I have never felt this way, there has never been anything like this. (Deshpande 234)

Men being fearless are clear about what they have to say. Women have think and re-think before expressing their innermost feelings and desires. Patriarchy has tutored her to do so. This has affected her thinking pattern too. She can never think straight. Her thoughts take a circuitous route.

Shashi Deshpande intends to reiterate that women are mere playthings in the hands of patriarchy. She voices it through Savi, Devayani's sister:

...He will sleep with you and dump you. He's using you, he needs your body, that's all he wants...I know these policemen, they get their subordinates to get them women, oh yes, I've heard the things they do, they just want a woman, some woman, they're cheap, disgusting, didn't you hear about the policeman who got his girlfriend killed... (Deshpande 184)

Yet again, fiction becomes an outlet for the pent up emotions that develop soon after the awareness of being inferior and 'subaltern' sink in. A note of resentment and the feeling of being stifled under the oppressive restrictions can be gauged in the fiction of women.

Shashi Deshpande's art lies in selecting situations with which most Indian women can identify. Her focus is on the woman within marital, domestic relationship. According to Deshpande, there is a sharp division between women's world and men's world, "even today, you'll notice, to insult a man, you say, 'go wear bangles'. Bangles mean identification totally, and absolutely, with a woman."(Kuortti)

Men and women have little in common:

Music for him was jazz and the Beatles and for me, hindi film songs, Hindustani classical and *ghazals*. He loved open spaces, the jungle, horses, dogs and I had my books, my walled garden, my plants. He could not imagine a meal without meat, and for me, even an egg was anathema. (Deshpande 208)

A woman cannot live on her own says patriarchy. She has to dwell under the guardianship of her father, her husband or her son. When a woman writes, she relates about experiences radically different from that of a man, her drive towards growth as hindered by the society's prescriptions concerning gender. Gender roles are not only oppressive to women in real life, but in literature as well. When a woman gives vent to her innermost feelings she invariably confesses that she feels like an outcast in the land, that she has neither a homeland of our own nor an ethnic place within society to call her own.

A woman's quest to be what she desires is thwarted. Yet the ray of hope shines bright. For the past hundreds of years the woman's novel has been a repository of not merely pain but hopes.

Men and women live differently because of their sex. Women's experiences differ from men's in profound ways. Hence the behaviour considered appropriate to each gender becomes almost polarized. Women have always been praised and encouraged for leading a subservient existence. A woman is considered incomprehensible if she doesn't abide by the rules laid down by patriarchy. The difference becomes crystal clear in the description of a picture of the protagonist's family:

There's this picture of the family taken just before Kamala's wedding. Parents and their two daughters. The parents are sitting on two straight – backed chairs, side by side, but not touching. There is a space between the two chairs, a visible gap. It's not just a physical distancing; both seem to be presenting only their individual selves to the camera. The individual thread that binds two people and makes them a couple, is missing. Each seems unaware of the other...The father, my grand father, is not a tall man. He is a small sized man, sitting erect, not touching the back of his chair, disdaining all support. He exudes authority and confidence. He is the power here, his presence the most important one... my grandmother on the

other hand, looks like she would rather not be there. She seems to be pressing down on her forearms, placed on the arms of the chair, as if she is forcing herself to sit there. (Deshpande 104)

Women in the past literally withered away because they were not allowed to live their own lives. They were compelled to live for others. They had no choice of self development, neither any work nor pursuits of their own. Their gifted, innate qualities were left to lie dormant and their abilities were allowed no sphere of action.

Women of today have travelled a long distance. They have a distinct personality; they pursue a career and are independent which aids her in her intellectual and social growth. When awareness sinks in, women feel like pulling down all that is old and out fashioned. The protagonist's father's plan to build a house remained unfulfilled. Weeds grew between stones and obliterated the old man's map and futile intentions. When the two sisters—Savi and Devyani take up the job, the result is amazing. Walls race up to meet the roof. The new house is a deliberate reversal of the old map, a denial of everything that was obsolete. The rooms were large, well-ventilated and airy. Huge windows with broad sills and the sense of openness were a total contrast to the dingy, dark, small rooms of their childhood.

Women are now strong and independent. Boys and girls are nurtured on a similar plane. Differences and prejudices are fast receding. The new woman has a purpose and an aim. She has economic dependence and she yearns to make a difference. She is not afraid of falling in love either:

And I also know that we could be happier than most married couples, that we could have the kind of marriage very few couples can even dream of. I hunger for him, I thirst for him. How easily you ask me to give him up. Have you any idea what he means to me? It's like asking me to give up life, to give up breath...What is life without breath? What is my life, my future without Ashok? Even the thought of living without him makes me feel like dying...I want someone to hold me and say, it's all right, it's all right. I want someone to say the most beautiful words in the world to me: *all will be well...* (Deshpande 201)

Devyani is a woman of integrity. She understands that a relationship with a married man was not right, it had no future. She is angry with the Gods too for having led her into love, into a country of deceit. She has loved and she is not ashamed of it. She is ashamed because love has made her mean and selfish:

...if love is so wonderful, why should love make me do what is wrong?
(Deshpande 202)

Ashok very easily backs out from the scene, without saying a word. He feigned ignorance when he had hurt her feelings. His passions knew no reason. For him Devyani was just a means of satiating his desires. He confessed:

...If I were a clever man, I would know what to give you. I would understand what makes you happy. (Deshpande 210)

Ashok had a family of his own. He had a wife and a daughter who was very dear to him. Yet he fell for Devyani. No amount of reasoning could stop him. Devyani was not in a relationship. She had fallen in love with Ashok but then she had the strength to analyse as a bystander.

Devayani knew that she had to move on. She could not continue to live a life sans purpose and meaning. Life is a precious gift to humans. She understood that the most important things in life happened and they were beyond one's control. Birth, death, our loved ones are just thrust upon us. No one has any control over such matters. Nothing in life remains unchanged. But Devayani knew that memories of Ashok would remain unchanged:

...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 to me, ashok folding me in his arms. These images are etched on my mind, they will stay with me forever...And why, yes why must I forget that I too had a moment, a very brief moment, when I raised my arms and my fingertips brushed the sky? No, I don't want to forget, I want to remember; it is not remembering, but forgetting that will be my greatest enemy. Is this what my life is going to be like from now—a constant struggle between trying to forget and wanting to remember?
(Deshpande 258-259)

The love-relationship of Ashok and Devayani is akin to an archetype: it expresses the desperate need to be whole, to give oneself unreservedly to another, so that nothing else in the world matters and to be loved in this way forever. This kind of passionate love can be summed up as insatiable and unrelenting. Many would call it a perverted passion.

Women writers have finally found their voices and are re-creating their identity. They do not hesitate in accepting and validating their body, their sexuality and their passions. The approach adopted by them is undoubtedly revolutionary. They continue to write about their experiences and they pass it on to those who care to read. They aim to rid themselves of the image of the woman created by men. They intend to denounce social constraints that had impeded the development of women's full potential.

They write about the life of a woman in different social spaces and at various historical times. They know the feminine world more intimately than men because they have been rooted there. Women have successfully pulled down the walls of her confinement by writing about her passionate feelings—which was forbidden—and by exercising her passion of writing about her own experiences.

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