



# Resonances Of Mythology In Select Shashi Deshpande's Novels

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## Abstract:

Ancient times have witnessed women being physically subjugated, socially discriminated, economically dependent and psychologically traumatised. But modern contemporary woman is breaking her silence, questioning the male dominance and bracing the challenges. This is the first instance of the 'New Woman' in Indian writers' English-language works. Modern Indian novelist Shashi Deshpande has focused in particular on the common predicament faced by middle class, educated, employed Indian women, whose quirks differ from those of urban women in India. Shashi Deshpande presents a reformed woman who reasons, scrutinizes and finally evolves into a New Woman. The protagonists of her novel whether it is Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Indu of *Roots and Shadows* or Jaya of *That Long Silence* all comprehend the suppression of 'self' due to the male conquered system which is rude, callous, suppressive, domineering and horrendous and hence forces them to break their silence to lead a life of a reformed 'New Woman'. The present paper discusses how the revelation of one's identity takes place through Indian mythological reflections.

**Key words:** mythology, New Woman, self, subjugation.

Indian women novelists in English writings have sporadically addressed the issues faced by oppressed women at different societal levels. In the process, they have examined the sociocultural norms and values that have shaped Indian women's roles and perceptions as well as their attempts to live in harmony with their environment. A group of educated women authors began writing seriously about Indian women in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, inspired by notable social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and others. These ladies made the first attempts in this direction. The most important among them were Toru Dutt, Raj Lakshmi Debi, Krupabai Santhi Natha, Shevantibai Nikumbe, Swarna Kumari Debi Ghosal, Santa and Sita Chatterjee and Cornelia Sorabji. Their works, in spite of all their flaws, seek to communicate not just their opinions on desired social reforms and women's issues, but also their own experiences as women. As John B. Alphonso Karkala puts it, 'They made an effort to raise awareness of the challenges and disadvantages women faced in the world of traditional Hinduism. These female authors battled to give their autobiographical narratives structure and form, which drew the attention of publishers in India and outside.'<sup>1</sup>

In due course novel in the hands of the women writers became an instrument of social reform. A comparison of the early women novelists and the contemporary (post-Independence) novelists tells us that in the earlier novels, the women rebelled against the current social issues such as child marriage, sati-system, atrocities suffered by the bride in the husband's house, denial of education to girls etc. The goal of contemporary novels is to depict characters who are torn apart by the competing forces of tradition and modernity, working women's plight, marital adjustment issues, and the search for a sense of 'self.' The predicament of the new Indian woman has been sufficiently explored by novelists such as Geeta Mehta, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Nayantara Sehgal, Manju Kapur, Shobha De, Namita Gokhale, and others. The reason why I have focused my studies on Shashi Deshpande's novels is that most of these

women novelists, it is complained, 'appear not to have paid much attention to the recent phenomenon of the educated earning wife and her adjustment or maladjustment in the family.'<sup>2</sup> Whereas Shashi Deshpande has particularly concentrated on the typical dilemma of middle class educated and employed Indian women whose problems are different from those of urban women in India.<sup>3</sup>

Shashi Deshpande's novels present a reformed woman who reasons, analyses and finally evolves into a New Woman. The protagonists of her novel whether it is Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Kalyani of *Matter of Time* or Jaya of *That Long Silence* all realise the subjugation of 'self' due to the male dominated system which is rude, callous, suppressive, domineering and unbearable and hence forces them to break their silence to lead a life of a reformed 'New Woman'. This revelation of one's identity or quest for self is brought out through the use of Indian mythology.

"Mythos" is the classical Greek word for any story or plot, whether it is real or made up, according to M.H. Abrams. However, myth is fundamentally a story within a mythology, which is a system of inherited stories with ancient origins that were accepted as true by a specific cultural group. Myths served to legitimize social customs and observances, establish the sanctions for rules by which people conduct their lives, and explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) social customs and observances.

Characters from mythology such as Dasharath, Rama, Sita, Draupadi, Krishna, Arjuna, Duryodhana, and Gandhari are skilfully included by Shashi Deshpande into her works. The uniformity of idealized conceptions in the Indian social context is undermined by all of them. By doing this, she gives her work depth and complexity while also supporting the story and giving the characters more weight.<sup>4</sup> In *Dark Holds No Terror* Saru's mother on her death bed takes courage from Duryodhana's experience.

It was the chapter of Duryodhana in the epic tale of the Mahabharata, near the conclusion of the fight....Upon the defeat of the Kauravas, Duryodhana, realizing he is nearly the last remaining survivor, departs the battlefield and enters a lake. He awaits the arrival of the Pandavas to end his life....That is the reality we all must confront in the end.

That we are solitary. We must be solitary.<sup>5</sup>

Saru, the protagonist, herself justifies her decision to 'go on living' based on Duryodhana's realisation that ultimately human beings are lonely.

And then it came to her. It was as if she was vouchsafed a vision, the same one's perhaps, that her mother had heard Duryodhana's story before she died. Although it may be an illusion, it constitutes the sole reality we comprehend, the only reality we shall ever comprehend. Consequently, the sole course of action is to proceed as though it is authentic, while being cognizant that it is merely an illusion. (198)

Jaya, the central character in the novel *That Long Silence* is an educated woman possessing modern education and traditional upbringing. She is a dutiful wife who has little choice to act independently. She feels that after being married she and her husband Mohan are like two bullocks yoked together.

A couple of oxen harnessed together ... It is easier for them to proceed in the same path. To pursue divergent paths would be tough.; & Which animal would willingly select for suffering? (11-12)

[*That Long Silence*, Deshpande Shashi. Penguin, New Delhi, 1989]

(Any additional references are made to this version and are incorporated in the body of the text itself)

It is at this juncture Jaya's retrospection begins and she realises that at every level in her life she was forced to be silent. When Mohan was accused of underhand illegal activities, first he accused Agarwal his co-worker for being responsible for the whole thing. Agarwal advises Mohan to stay away from the office until the storm is over. Mohan, along with his wife Jaya, decides to go and reside for some time at Jaya's maternal uncle's flat to escape the scandal of malpractice. Mohan assumed Jaya would accompany him. Jaya says,

.... Both he and I had taken my assent to his idea for granted.  
 Sita goes into exile with her husband. Savitri hounds Death  
 to keep her husband, whereas Draupadi stoically endures  
 her spouse's misfortunes ... (11)

As with Sita and Savitri in the past, Jaya was forced to accompany Mohan; rather than being a free woman who lived her life as she pleased, Jaya was Mohan's wife. To avoid upsetting Mohan, she quietly took everything as

It would hurt to go in opposite directions. (12)

Though Jaya was not interested in a pompous life style, she had to give in as she was just to accept his ways in 'silence'. Jaya stated that it would be challenging for her to respond if Mohan had inquired about her desires. To elucidate her argument, she references Maitreyee, who declined her philosopher husband Yajnavalkya's proposition of half his estate, asserting that such property would not confer immortality upon her. The husband could never ascertain her desires.

Will I be granted immortality by this property? She questioned him.  
 'No', She instantly rejected the property once he mentioned it. To  
 understand your desires It has been withheld from me. 'Even now,  
 I'm not sure what I want,' states Jaya. (25)

Jaya was likewise unsure of her desires. Jaya showed no interest in anything that wasn't necessary for day-to-day living either. She made the decision to be 'silent' even while Mohan gathered devices and crafts. Since she was one of the pair of oxen yoked jointly, she was unable to follow her own path. Mohan worked as a junior engineer in a Lohanagar steel plant when Jaya got married. However, he felt that the money he was receiving was insufficient. Mohan managed to get a job in Bombay. Jaya never tried to know how her husband got the lucrative job, how he earned the money for their new comforts. Jaya says,

I hardly actually asked him how he accomplished it. If Gandhari  
 may be regarded as the perfect wife, given that she covered her  
 eyes to become blind like her husband, I was also the perfect wife.  
 I firmly bandage my eyes. I had no desire to learn anything.  
 Enough for one of us to relocate to Bombay, so I could have  
 whatever I wanted, that we could send Rahul and Rati to reputable  
 schools, etc. good clothing, a refrigerator, a gas hookup, and first-rate travel... (62)

Jaya believes that if Mohan is a sinner, then she must acknowledge that she is one as well.

'There was a simple word I had to take into account,'  
 the woman recalls, 'retribution.' (127)

A deed and a punishment came one after the other inexorably and logically. Shravana Kumara was an innocent little child whose parents perished while grieving for their kid. Dasharath killed him. Years later, Dasarath also passed away, wailing 'Rama, Rama' for his son. (128)

Finally we see Jaya after suffering for about seventeen years of married life, decides to speak out. Jaya decided to erase the 'silence'.

I'll have to make up for our silent. (92)

She decides to speak. She realises that she has to make a choice as Maitreyee took a decision for herself. In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna told Arjuna that he must make his own decisions.  
*Yathechassis thathakuru.*

Now that I've informed you, it's up to you to decide.

You have the option. Act in the way that suits you. (192)

Jaya relates her resolution of breaking the silence to the wisdom imparted by Krishna to Arjuna.

Even in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* Kalyani is reminded of Yamunabai, her mother's teacher and mentor, whose faith was:

*Nimitta matram bhava Savyasachi*

Which has been explained as follows:

...be thou only the instrument, Arjuna. The end is not us, it is quite separate from us. We are only the instruments. (188)

Thus, the revelation of identity, selfhood comes from the mythological reflections which urge the protagonist to retrospect and introspect during her life's journey to free herself from the shackles of male dominance.

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