



Challenging Deceptions: An Exploration Of Reformative Feminism In *In The Country Of Deceit*

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Shashi Deshpande's novel *In the Country of Deceit* stands as a testament to her position as a prominent figure in contemporary Indian English literature. Through her prolific writings, Deshpande intricately captures the microcosm of India, weaving together elements of tradition, culture, and social conventions. Central to her narratives are recurring themes of love, relationships, family, and home, all underlined by a nuanced exploration of feminine sensibility. From *The Dark Holds No Terrors* to *Moving On*, Deshpande's heroines navigate the complexities of life, caught between the pull of tradition and the push of modernity. Notably, these strong female characters not only withstand life's tumults but also embody Deshpande's vision of "reformative feminism."

The novel *In the Country of Deceit* distinguishes itself with its bold subject matter and unique treatment. The title, with its use of the term 'deceit,' prompts questions about who is deceived in the narrative. Does the deception occur in a specific place, or is it a state of mind? This analysis seeks to unravel these questions, focusing on the themes of love and adultery within the novel. The narrative unfolds across four segments -

"Ground Zero," "Epiphany," "In the Country of Deceit," and "Unspooning." Each segment's title serves as a metaphorical pointer to its content. The story begins with Devayani, the heroine, recovering from the demolition of her ancestral home by constructing a modern house. As Devayani expresses at the outset: "Ground Zero". It was I who said the words. And, in spite of the death knell sound of the words, in spite of their association with destruction... For us, this was not an end, but a beginning. A fresh start. A clean state" (ICD 1). This study delves into *In the Country of Deceit* as a lens through which to explore reformative feminism, assessing how Deshpande's narrative challenges and redefines societal norms.

The subsequent section, "Epiphany," ignites tender sentiments within Devayani as she encounters the euphoria of love and intimacy with her partner Ashok. The third segment holds immense significance in the novel, providing an intimate view into the protagonist's inner conflict and cognitive processes. In this phase, Devayani ultimately triumphs over challenging circumstances, leading to a spiritual revelation in the fourth segment.

Devayani in the novel stands out as one of Shashi Deshpande's remarkably ambitious characters, a creation that evolved over a span of nearly 20 years. Reflecting on this, the author shared in an interview with The Hindu: "Devayani, a character in an early novel *Come Up and Be Dead* lingered. I ignored her, but she was quietly persistent. Five novels and 20 years later after completing *Moving On*, I realized that the next novel would be Devayani's story" (ambianny.blogspot).

The novelist intricately weaves the character of Devayani Mudhol into the tapestry of the mythical Devayani from the Mahabharata. Drawing a parallel, the novel unfolds a tale akin to that of Yayati's Devayani, who, despite being the queen, found herself unfulfilled in love as Yayati's affections lay with Sharmishtha. Yayati's Devayani becomes a symbol of a woman "who never got what she wanted, who never understood what love meant" (ICD 36). Shashi Deshpande ingeniously reinterprets this myth through the lens of her protagonist, Devayani Mudhol, and her relationship with Ashok Chinnapa, narrated in the first person by Devayani herself. Adding depth to the narrative, the author incorporates letters from other characters to Devayani, providing additional layers to the storyline. As the novel unfolds, we witness Devayani's transformative journey, evolving from Devayani to Devi and ultimately to Divya, a modern embodiment of the mythical Devayani.

Devayani, initially grappling with the complexities of discerning societal norms around right and wrong, love, and its unconventional expressions, undergoes a transformative journey fueled by her experiences,

particularly her love affair with Ashok. In her words: “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?” (ICD 257). At the novel's onset, Devayani, in her 30s and having lost her parents, chooses solitude in the small town of Rajnur. Immersing herself in gardening and teaching English to local children, she finds solace. Despite occasional bouts of loneliness, she cherishes her independence. Irony surfaces as Devayani rejects seemingly suitable marriage proposals but unexpectedly enters into an illicit relationship with Ashok Chinappa, a middle-aged DSP in Rajnur, who is married and a father to a ten-year-old daughter.

Devayani's introduction to Ashok, orchestrated by the middle-aged actress Rani at a small gathering, takes an unexpected turn when Ashok proposes to her with no promises for the future. The call for love resonates deeply with Devayani, prompting her to defy societal norms and venture into what Shashi Deshpande aptly terms 'the country of deceit.' This metaphorical realm can be interpreted as a world of love and desires, tinged with an awareness of guilt. Devayani acknowledges this deceitful state, expressing, "I had entered the country of deceit. I could no longer be open and honest with people I loved; I had to deceive them" (ICD 147). The title, "In the Country of Deceit," encapsulates the protagonist's consciousness of concealing reality, reflecting the slippery and treacherous terrain that love navigates, as articulated by Shashi Deshpande in an online interview: “It seems odd, doesn't it? But, when you think of what love does to people and the things love makes them do...My novel explores the slippery, treacherous terrain that love takes people into”(ambianny.blogspot).

Devayani in this novel emerges as a prism-like character, revealing various potential shades that come to light when illuminated by the spark of Ashok's love. Her complexity extends beyond surface appearances, depicting a character that is more profound than initial impressions suggest. Devayani is a deeply thoughtful and self-aware individual, consciously navigating her actions. While the events in her life might appear accidental or coincidental, closer scrutiny reveals them as well-considered decisions. For instance, her response to Ashok's proposal isn't impulsive; she takes several days, contemplating and evaluating every aspect before making a decision. Possessing an insightful, meditative, and philosophical temperament, Devayani's perception of life remains independent, unbridled by societal conventions. Devayani reflects in the following manner:

I had wanted to go to a place where no one would know me...I felt as if I had shed my past and become a new person altogether. I was not Devayani Mudhol, I was an anonymous Nobody. It felt good. I knew then why people walked out of their homes leaving everything behind.(ICD 15-16)

These words vividly capture the profound sense of dejection experienced by the heroine. Initially, Devayani remains unaffected by the deluge of marriage proposals and explicit suggestions from friends and relatives. She doesn't yield to advice such as "anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection" (ICD 28), "collective experience has value, individual experience has none" (ICD 41), or "the generating organ is the centre of all pleasure" (ICD 43). However, her friendship with the neighbor, actress Rani, opens the gate to a realm of "ananda" (bliss), a space from which she enters and never returns (ICD 43).

Devayani's life undergoes a profound transformation with her frequent clandestine meetings with Ashok. Love and sex not only become prominent in the protagonist's life but also shape the novel's narrative. While the nectar of love intoxicates Devayani, a persistent realization of her actions compels her to evaluate the two sides of her being: "I believe in marriage, I believe that marriage means loyalty, it means being honest... As for love, I think it does not justify deceiving another person, I don't think it excuses cruelty..." (ICD 94). The love relationship between Devayani and Ashok is primarily governed by the head rather than the heart, distinguishing it from adolescent love. Devi, contemplating the distinction between adolescent and adult love, plans to trans-create her own love story into a film, emphasizing, "I was not thinking of the usual filmy love story. I am thinking of the real thing. Between two adults ... I am speaking of people in their thirties and forties" (ICD 139).

The third segment of the novel, which also lends its title, may be perceived as a realm of deceit due to the illicit nature of the love affair between Devi and Ashok. However, the author doesn't necessarily endorse this perspective. She upholds the idea of pure love, a love that is highly respectable and doesn't demand or promise anything. While societal norms may label it as deceitful, it is considered divine when selfless and unconditional. The guilt experienced by Devi in the latter part of the novel isn't inherently hers but is generated by societal pressures. Deshpande delves deep into the psyche of her young heroines, particularly when they rebel against traditional ways of life. Devayani's internal conflict arises when her sister warns her that society might label her as Ashok's "girl," "mistress," "whore," or "flossy" due to her relationship with a married man.

Through Devi's character, the author aims to present the predicament of unmarried girls within social and individual realities. Devi's introspective nature leads her to contemplate her actions and their consequences. Her incessant thinking offers insight into the mental mechanics of Devayani. Despite the guilt associated with adultery, Devi realizes that it remains a complex interplay of emotions, swinging between euphoria and despair. She grapples with the awareness that adultery is laden with guilt and fear. Devi acknowledges the main preoccupation of adulterous couples—how and where to meet. While she enjoys the sensuous experiences with Ashok and his endearments, she also grapples with the guilt, recognizing that all she has is guilt. Nevertheless, Devi is willing to live with this guilt, expressing a determination to cope with it, much like learning to live with suffering, pain, and death.

Ashok, the primary male character in the novel and Devayani's lover, is portrayed as a mature and professionally accomplished individual. Described as "a man with weight and substance," (ICD, 112). His character, while not as evolved as the heroine, plays a crucial role in her personal development. Despite failing to uphold complete loyalty to his wife by breaching the sanctity of his marriage, Ashok's love for Devi is depicted as selfless. He takes great care to protect Devi's reputation, even expressing a willingness to divorce his wife for her towards the end of the novel. Notably, he neither deceives nor deserts Devayani, and their physical separation is an expression of obedience to her decision. Ashok emerges as a true lover, winning the reader's admiration for his sincerity and honesty. While initially proposing to 'promise nothing' to Devayani, he unwittingly provides her with a profound and lasting experience.

Devayani acknowledges the sincerity of his emotions, but societal interpretations of extra-marital relationships, fuelled by her sister and relatives, introduce a sense of guilt into her conscience. She embarks on a tumultuous journey of guilt, ultimately deciding to distance herself from Ashok. The protagonist, feeling "incommunicado" after entering the realm of love, grapples with the imposed moral and ethical conventions that force her to perceive it as "the country of deceit." This acceptance terminates the flow of "hormone music" (ICD 18) from her life, as Devi says:

I had had a strange sense of being rift into two selves: one doing things and the other watching, thinking, I will never forget this, I will remember this all my life. Now both of us were aware that we were coming to the end of this time together. Only a few hours, but we had crammed a whole lifetime into them, we had lived a whole life together. (ICD 195)

Despite this, the eternal experience of love provides her with solace and towering tolerance. Deshpande, through Devayani's character, challenges orthodox societal conventions, providing her with the strength to defy conservative norms. Devi asserts her right to make choices and vehemently criticizes society's double standards. She argues for the possibility of second chances in marriage, emphasizing that even criminals get a second chance. Deshpande conceptualizes love as a potent force capable of surviving independently. In her view, love is not merely a union of two individuals of opposite sexes but a natural bond formed on the basis of mutual harmony. According to Devayani, relationships don't need external authority for building or sustaining. She expresses her desire for a relationship with Ashok, challenging societal expectations and emphasizing the depth of their connection.

Devayani undergoes a profound intellectual transformation as she realizes that her love affair with Ashok will face societal disapproval. Despite continuing to love Ashok, she acknowledges the limitations of their relationship. Describing their concluding meetings, she notes that while their feelings for each other remain unchanged, there is a recognition of what is possible and what is not. Transformed into Divya, she acts judiciously and rejects societal labels of 'right' and 'innocent.' Devayani's decisions reflect enlightenment, cultural rootedness, and an awareness of life's realities. According to A. Maria Philomi and Shanti, Deshpande's female characters make decisions based on analysis, overcoming identity crises and subordination. Devayani worships her love, even if deemed "cheap" by society, rejecting the confines of marriage. Shashi Deshpande appears to support relationships akin to cohabitation, emphasizing the sanctity of emotion and honest dedication.

Without Ashok, Devayani once again experiences loneliness, expressing her grief. Her father's assertion that "love is only an idea" resurfaces, emphasizing the impermanence of things. However, Devayani finds solace in the unchanging lanes of memory. The narrative concludes with Devayani expressing her desire to remember rather than forget, acknowledging the constant struggle between the two.

The novel strikingly presents Devayani's dilemma, navigating her love affair with a married man against societal norms. Balancing traditionalism and progressiveness, the narrative realistically portrays Devayani's wistful pursuit of love. The theme of adult love is boldly discussed from a hedonistic perspective. Deshpande's mastery over language is evident, incorporating Kannada and other non-English words to contextualize the

narrative within Indian cultural ethos. Her insightful references to Indian philosophy and mythology add depth to the narrative, drawing on Mahabharata, Upanishads, Vishnupurana, and more.

Deshpande's portrayal of enlightened, culturally rooted women making decisions based on analysis aligns with the principles of reformative feminism. These characters transcend stereotypes, showcasing the diversity of women's experiences and choices. *In the Country of Deceit* contributes to reformative feminism by providing a narrative space where women can assert their agency, challenge societal norms, and redefine their identities beyond traditional expectations. The novel encourages readers to rethink established norms and consider alternative narratives that empower women to shape their destinies.

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