

Mythology – Source of Strength in That Long Silence

Prasanna Udipikar

Department of English, V.V.N. Degree College, Bangalore.

In olden times women were physically dominated, socially discriminated, economically dependent and emotionally traumatised more than the current times. But modern contemporary woman is breaking her silence, questioning the male dominance and bracing the challenges. This marks the birth of 'New Woman' in the novels of Indian Writing in English. The contemporary novelist Shashi Deshpande's protagonists of middle-class Indian women present a transformed woman who reasons, examines and finally advances 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 realize the suppression of 'self', finally leading to the deconstruction of patriarchal culture and customs, and revealing these to be man-made constructs (Atrey and Kirpal, 15). The present paper discusses how the deconstruction takes place through Indian mythological replications.

The novel in the hands of the Indian women writers became a device of social reformation. There is a striking contrast between the earlier novels and the contemporary Indian novels. In the earlier novels, the women rebelled against the current social issues such as denial of education to girls, child marriage, atrocities suffered by the bride in the husband's house, sati-system, etc. The contemporary novels aim at portraying women with conflicting ideas of tradition and modernity, the dilemma of working women, their problems of marital adjustments and their search for 'self' identity. The Indian women novelists like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Shobha De, Namita Gokhale, Geeta Mehta and others have dealt with the plight of emerging new woman. The present study on Shashi Deshpande's novels concentrates on the predicament and revelation of middle class educated Indian women. This revelation of one's identity or quest for self is brought out through the use of Indian mythology.

Shashi Deshpande effortlessly uses mythology archetypal characters like Dasharath, Rama, Sita,

Draupadi, Krishna, Arjuna, Duryodhana and Gandhari in her novels. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel *That Long Silence* is an educated lady with 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 pair of bullocks yoked together ... it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction.

To go in the different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain? (11-12)

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

(All further references are to this edition, 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. 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 quotes the mythological characters and says,

Sita follows her husband into exile. Savitri dogging Death to retain her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails ... (11)

Jaya had to go with Mohan like Sita and Savitri of the olden days, instead of being an independent woman, living according to her choice, she was Mohan's wife. She accepted everything in silence in case Mohan would be disturbed. 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'. According to Jaya it would be difficult for her to answer if Mohan had asked her what she wanted. To make her point clear, she cites the example of Maitreyee who rejected her philosopher husband Yajnavalkya's offer of half of his property saying that the said property would not give her immortality. The husband could never know what she wanted.

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” (25)

Jaya also did not know what she wanted. She chose to remain ‘silent’ even when Mohan was gathering gadgets and art crafts. She was after all one of the two bullocks yoked together; it was not possible for her to go her own way.

When Jaya got married Mohan was a Junior Engineer in a Steel Plant in Lohanagar, but he was not satisfied with the salary he was getting. Mohan managed to get a job in Bombay. Jaya never tried to know how he earned the money for their new comforts. Jaya says,

I never asked him how he did it. 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 bandage my eyes tightly.

I didn’t want to know anything. It was enough for one that we moved to Bombay, that we could send Rahul and Rati to good schools, that I could have the things needed ... decent clothes, a fridge, a gas connection, travelling in first class... (62)

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. Dasharath killed an innocent young boy Shrivana kumar whose parents died crying out for their son. And years later, Dasarath died too, calling out for his son ‘Rama, Rama.” (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 will have to erase the silence between us. (92)

She decides to speak. She realises that she has to make a choice as Maitreyee made a choice of her own. Sri Krishna said to Arjuna in Bhagavad Gita that he himself has to make a choice

“Yathechassithathakuru”

I have given you knowledge, now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire. (192)

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

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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