WOMEN OF THE MAHABHARATHA: PERSPECTIVE OF SHASHI DESHPANDE

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande's stories are primarily woman-centered. She honestly portrays the sufferings, disappointments, and frustrations of her protagonists. The themes that operate in her stories are guilt, failure, frustration, loss, and loneliness. Deshpande lets her protagonists search and analyze their "selves," and thus probes into the existential problems of women. In an effort to maintain peace and harmony in their families, Deshpande's protagonists lose their own selves and become victims.

Even the women in our epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are not exempt from this victimization. In the stories of *The Stone Women*, Deshpande goes back to the greatest epics of India. Their core stories are more than 3000 years old and tell innumerable stories. But in many of these stories, women, though very much present, have had no voice. In "The Inner Rooms," "Hear Me, Sanjaya," and "And what has been decided?" Deshpande has lent voices respectively to Amba, Kunti and Draupadi the very famous women characters of the Mahabharatha, and allows them, finally, to explain their predicament. For Deshpande, the story becomes a medium of moral and psychological analysis and her focus is almost invariably on the "inner" life.

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INTRODUCTION

Myths form a large part of the human psyche. They dictate our ideas to such an extent that we are unable to distinguish the reality of what we perceive and what we learn of ourselves through them. In India, they are even more powerful as they have been maintaining an unbroken tradition. Indian myths have created role models for women. Women are always expected to be "as pure as Sita, as loyal as Draupadi, as beautiful as Laxmi, as bountiful a provider as Annapurna, as dogged in devotion as Savitri, as strong as Durga."[1] But men are exempted from the need to be such stereotypes. The fact is that Myths have been created and interpreted by men to fulfill their various needs. "Women", says Simone de Beauvoir "have no virile Myths in which their projects are reflected, they still dream through the dreams of men. Gods made by males are the gods they worship."[2]

The search for self, self-analysis and a probe into the existential problems of woman are the recurrent themes in Shashi Deshpande's writings. Traditional Indian society limits woman's individual development and growth. She has to abide by many rules and restrictions as she is controlled by man throughout her life. Deshpande attempts to analyse this relationship of woman with man within the ambit of family and society. Inspired by Iravati Karve's *Yuganta* Deshpande browses the minds of Amba, Draupadi, and Kunti with a woman's point of view. With a microscopic precision she concentrates on their complex psychology that has been perpetually walled and restricted by the dynamics of don'ts.

In "The Inner Rooms" Deshpande looks at some incidents of the Mahabharatha through Amba's eyes and sees her anger, her utter disgust, at the games men play, of her despair at having become a pawn in their games. Bhishma – for the sake of his oath, Salva – in the name of defeat, and Vichitravirya – for having been humiliated – reject Amba and treat her most cruelly. Seized by a cloud of shame, she thinks:" *honour dishonour, right, wrong* – what are these but words used by men to cover their real emotions?"(20) Now she has nowhere to go. "To exist and not to be seen. To speak and not to be heard." (21) It is like being a child again, trapped in those inner rooms where the whole world had closed in on her and where the tears and protests would have no meaning as they remain unnoticed by the outside world.

Once, she is out, she is amazed to find the freedom she had never known before. A sense of peace descends on her. She repents over her foolishness in letting her happiness depend on other people – a burden of her own happiness. She feels a fleeting pity for her sisters she has left

behind "in the inner rooms, stoically waiting for the man who was their husband to visit them at night, living in the constant hope of bearing him sons."(17) At least, she finds solace, for she has "escaped *that* degradation by rejecting that same husband in an open assembly."(17)

As she moves into the forest, with a sense of emptiness, it appears strange that minor discomforts matter most – "the thorns that pricked her feet, her dry throat and tongue, her burning eyes and aching muscles."(16) Compared to these her previous "Pride, anger, hatred, revenge "(16) dwindled into "foolish toys she had played with for too long" (16). As she comes to a stop with a view to put an end to her journey, her mind becomes empty and blank like the sky before the first star comes out. Her hatred also recedes too far from her. Nothing is left now but her own self. "But what was that self? And who was she?"(22) She analyses and tries to discover herself. She is "neither a daughter, nor a wife, nor a mother."(22)

The ignorance of even the dark people of the forest increases her sense of isolation. "She did not belong to their world; she did not belong to the world she had left behind, either."(22) The world where life is lived according to rules makes no sense to her and she has defied those rules. However, it has not prevented her from being a pawn in their games. So she thinks: "She would sacrifice the pawn herself."(23) Amba tries to assert herself by taking a pathetic decision that is to kill herself. "The act would be her own. At least, this one thing would be of her choosing, it would be done the way she wanted, at the time she chose."(23) Only when confronted by flames, in a moment of panic, she realizes the bitter truth that she is trapped again after all the ways have been closed. She closes "her eyes against sight, her ears against sounds and her mind against doubts and fears" (23) and lies still, "submerged in nothingness."(23) Her shrill, anguished cries – her last tenuous link to the world are silenced and ultimately "there was nothing left but silence."(23)

The pathetic monologue of Amba mirrors the unaltered predicament of woman in a country like India, where the Vedas hail and respect woman. Even in the epics, men have undermined woman's self-sustaining identity. Women like Amba can choose only death, not life. Her existence is deliberately reduced to nothing by the male dominated community. Deshpande asserts: "In my story, her (Amba's) decision to kill herself is not because she thinks she is defeated, but because she thinks that, if she cannot control her life, at least she can control her death'.[3] Thus Amba is presented victorious atleast in her death.

Draupadi is another character from the Mahabharatha who is looked at from a new perspective when Dehspande sets out on a fascinating journey of probing into the psyche of the mythological characters. In "And what had been decided?" Deshpande sees Draupadi as a spirited, headstrong, young girl falling in love with Arjuna, dressed as a Brahmin who won her hand with his heroic feats. Draupadi followed him, conscious only of that shining youth and wholly oblivious of the others with him. She did not even know that he was a kshatriya. She would have been very happy if she was allowed to marry only Arjuna. But that was not her destiny. The mother said that all five of them must share whatever they brought home. Draupadi knew that it was foolish but there was no going back. Their destinies were linked together.

And so Draupadi became the wife of five men. But her hungers were never satisfied. No one can see the woman in her, "the woman hungry for love, for passion."(32) She was Yudhishthira's Queen, but not his beloved and he always kept a distance between them. Bhima treated her like "a fragile, precious flower he is afraid to pluck." (32) Nakul and Sahadev were only boys. And Arjuna, it was only in him she was deceived:

"I saw you in the assembly; my eyes singled you out in that crowd. When you shot the arrow, I came forward to garland you − I am ashamed now to remember how swiftly I moved to you with the garland, leaving my brother and his restraining hands behind. I followed you when you walked out, it didn't matter to me where we were going . . . I had chosen you, I had garlanded you, I was your wife − this was all that mattered."(32)

She wanted to reserve all her feelings for Arjuna alone. She wanted him as a lover but not as a friend. But he had withdrawn into his shell for he did not want what he could not share with his brothers. She hammered her heart into submission and tried to kill the sensations in her body. At times, she had had a wild desire to ask Subhadra: "How is it with him alone? How does it feel to have Arjuna in your bed? How is it to know that his desire for you is a friend not an enemy?"(33) It was that one year of disguise – the only time when Draupadi was truly free, all by her: "Each day complete in itself, ending where it began, enclosing us in its security. And I going to bed each night, happy to be by myself, to have no one to share my bed."(33)

Ranjana Ash speaks of Deshpande's writing as something that questions the place of Indian womanhood in the Dharma of the land. What is Dharma? Is it the same for women as it is for the men? These are questions put by women very often. Draupadi also asked just such questions in the assembly when she faced the terrible humiliation. Where did she fit into all these

games of men? How could Yudhishthira make her a pawn after he had lost himself in the gambling? These questions have remained unanswered till date. No brother of Yudhishthira questioned him and came to the rescue of Draupadi. How can she trust them?

"So intact a whole that they seem to be parts of one unit, none of them complete in themselves. How then could I (Draupadi) have expected them to cry out against the brother who had made me a pawn?" (30)

When Krishna gets prepared to go to Hastinapur and ask for half the kingdom on behalf of Pandavas, Draupadi intrudes and reminds them of the humiliation she had faced in the assembly and the promises made by Bhima and Arjuna. But all the five remain stoic saying "Peace is always better than war" (26). They assert that they are frightened not of dying but of killing. Draupadi realizes all over again: ". . . how dense and close a thicket the five of them form, a thicket none can penetrate". Draupadi can trust each of them separately, but not "the entity they form together."(30) Unfortunately Draupadi is made a pawn to keep the brothers united.

Krishna tries to soothe Draupadi's anger and pacify her saying that he would "never press for peace with dishonour" (27). Draupadi questions if the Kauravas agree to give half the kingdom would the Pandavas remain satisfied and forget their promises. She feels all those words are forgotten because she is a woman and this she cannot tolerate:

"I thought . . . that an oath is an oath, a promise is a promise. I imagined these things are meant to be kept. Whoever they are made to. I did not know that promises made to women mean so little, that they are so light they can be as easily blown away . . . as this."(28)

This brings a stir among all of them and Krishna convinces her and promises that her honour would be safe in his hands. Finally the king responds and says: "The Queen wants war and she will have it" (33) as if it is Draupadi's decision and it is she who is wholly responsible for the Great War. When Draupadi looks into Krishna's eyes something strange happens and she sees a vision of horror, of the battle-field.

Draupadi drags her eyes away from Krishna's and walks out of the room, her legs heavy and inert, her heart banging about in her ribs, her mouth dry, her body clammy with sweat. She stands still as the vision haunts her – the war, all the men she knew dead and her sons as well. As the horror of the vision slowly fades, the question begins: "What have I done?"(34) And she terribly repents for she has provoked her husbands to wage the war.

As she stands still, shivering, she hears voices, from inside, speaking in different tones – "Strong. Sure of themselves. Businesslike." (34) Draupadi realizes that her husbands have already prepared for the war and she has been made and utilized as a pawn by creating that it is her decision, thus they have put the cause of the war on her:

"It's begun. They are already preparing, they have decided on war, they know there will be war. But why, then, did they not tell me that? Why did they make me believe it is my decision, my doing? Why?" (34)

If her husbands, along with Krishna, have already decided for the war, why do they put the blame on Draupadi? The frustration in her life has its seeds in Kunti advising her five sons to share whatever they brought home. Is it right for Draupadi to marry all the five? For Yudhishthira "What a mother says cannot be wrong. Our mother would never tell us to do a wrong."(31) But what did this do to Draupadi? How did she feel making herself available to five men? Certainly she led a life having no physical or emotional space for her self. But her plight of having five husbands was surely understood by one woman, the perfect mother, Kunti. Did Kunti justify what she did? Did she blame herself? Did being a good mother make it all right in her own eyes? In order to furnish answers for such questions, Deshpande brings out the psyche of Kunti in" Hear me, Sanjaya". While doing so she also reveals how cruel and insecure life was for Kunti right from her childhood and what made her take such drastic decisions.

As a young girl Pritha was never "pampered and indulged." (48) Her father gave her away to his friend very easily as if she was "a bit of property" (48) because he was displeased with her as she had done something wrong. Thereafter she was continuously haunted by a fear that if she displeased this man too, he would give her away to someone else. And so she tried hard never to displease him. She was given a new name, Kunti, thus changing her identity which she hated very much.

Kunti had certainly wronged two persons in her life – Karna and Draupadi. In fact she was helpless in both the cases. Having given birth to Karna even before her marriage the young Kunti had no other choice but leave the child in a river. But till the day she saw that child as a grown up man she kept hearing the child's cries "that drowned the sounds of the river."(49) It was only after seeing him, she "stopped hearing the cries. As if the child had died at last." (49) She called him, "My son" (49) but he never called her "Mother" (49), not once. There were so many things she could have said to him that day: *I was too young, I was only a child, I did not*

understand what I was doing, I only did what they told me to do."(49) She knows it was of no use. He would not have heard her. Thus her words in self-defence remained unheard.

The day Draupadi entered their hut with all the joy, Kunti saw "something else" on the faces of her other four sons. For their sake she took away all the joy from Draupadi. Then she saw Yudhishthira's face light up, she saw Bhima's joy, but did not dare to look at Draupadi. But later, when she did "it was as if the light had been dimmed." She knew people thought that she did it out of cunning, to keep her sons together, and to get the kingdom back. She was always silent when she heard this. "Let people think this way; in a way, it's a better reason than the real one."(47) Anyhow it makes no difference to Draupadi. Kunti regrets this very much but felt that there was no other choice for her:

"I did her a great wrong. She should have been the wife of the one man she loved – Arjuna. She would have looked up to Yudhishthira like a father and Nakul and Sahadev – they would have been her friends. . . But what about Bhima then? . . . No, I did what I had to do. I had no choice." (47-48)

Kunti must have been a very hard woman to make the choice she made that day: "If I had not been hard, would I have survived?" (48) Kunti faced hardships throughout her life. Her marital life was not a satisfactory one. The day her husband brought Madri home she realized she was not beautiful: "How unfair life is to a woman who does not have beauty? . . . Until then I had not known it, perhaps I had not thought about it. But after I saw her, every day, each moment of each day . . ." (45)

When Madri died with her husband, Kunti felt "he needed her more, even in that other world."(46) She was left all alone and was given the responsibility of the two sons of Madri. Deshpande expresses the modernized agony of Kunti in her own words: "She's escaping. I thought. She's taking away all the glory, dying with her husband, leaving the struggle, the drudgery for me." (46) In the modern world looking after two children, that too of the other woman, is certainly a domestic drudgery. But Kunti was not an escapist. A new woman emerged out of her, "a charioteer" (46), who led all the five sons to their destiny.

To probe through the women characters of the Mahabharatha is an adventurous mythological journey for Deshpande. Whenever she hears the accusation that it was Draupadi who was really responsible for the war she invariably thinks of two women, the two sisters of the courageous and unfortunate Amba. They were, after their husband's death, forced to sleep with a

terrifying-looking stranger. They were, in truth, raped by him so that they would have children to rule the rulerless kingdom. Because of that act of cruelty, that dark deed, were born Pandu and Dhritharashtra, the two brothers in whose history, in whose birth lie the seeds of the Great War. Deshpande expresses her regrets for those two women through Kunti:

"Those two queens, our mothers-in-law. Gandhari's and mine . . . rarely spoke, except to each other – and that only in whispers – and moved about so little and so silently it was hard to remember they were there."(42)

Even after their death ". . . they began to haunt me. As if the walls had absorbed their whispers, I could feel their words in the air about me."(42)

The whole tragedy is the result of the futile vows, which Kunti thinks, are just a cover for the willfulness of self-willed people: ". . . if only Bhishma had given up his vow, if he had had children of his own, then perhaps those sisters would have lived normal, happy lives."(43) And the Great War would have never been fought.

CONCLUSION

Indian classical literature as well as history is rejuvenated in these stories which can be considered the most articulate and moving of the short stories of Deshpande. They belong to a new genre of stories in which women writers retell the stories of Indian mythology. Nayantara Sahagal says that a re-examination of these epics from the point of view of women writers is quite essential: "Through such re-writing . . . new Sitas and Savitris will arise, stripped of false sanctity and crowned with the human virtue of courage. Then at last we will know why they did, what they did . . ."[4]

No Indian can ever forget the arrogant Amba, and the wise women, Kunti and Draupadi. The images of these women presented in epics are strictly male drawn pictures. But the exploration and examining of the reality of woman's experiences from a woman's perspective results not only in mere verisimilitude, but also in a deeply felt new vision of that reality. This is what Deshpande does quite successfully.

Though these characters are strictly mythological, Deshpande in her stories modernizes their grief. Deshpande, by lending voice to these epic women, builds up their persona little by little, hinting at episodes after episodes, which had marked their lives. Women are almost always at disadvantage. They have to bear silently many injustices in their lives. Deshpande's epic women are women who speak to our hearts, whom we can understand, and sympathise with.

Deshpande's writings hold:

"A universal appeal that clearly emanates from her rootedness in everyday India. A society in which we breathe, a culture to which we belong. Her major concerns emerge from our own environment, from our immediate world, holding up mirrors to our own lives".[5]

This type of creative writing has allowed Deshpande to create her own fictional world, 'a safe place' in which she can explore a wide range of experience, especially with regard to a woman's status in the society. "She sensitively portrays the lot of women and their mute, convoluted self-abnegation in her stories."[6] Mythological or modern, her women are all versions of each other pegged at different ages and in different situations and the result is identical – Woman is the Victim!

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