



Shashi deshpande: A study with special reference to the rooting of self in the mythological consciousness

Jaishree

Research Scholar, Department of English, A.P.S. University, Rewa, Madhya Pradesh, India

Abstract

The present paper will deal with the use for myth and folklore that Shashi Deshpande selected as her mode of expression to explore the inner recesses of woman-psyche who has been a mute witness from the ages of every suffering inflicted on her kind by no one else but her counterpart and the society that too often acts as a villain with all its means. The term 'Myth' is derived from the Greek word mythos, which simply means 'story'. It is a story has come to us travelling through the ages and retaining in it the knowledge and observation of so many generations through which it has passed. Accepted as history, it serves to explain the world-view of people. It also embodies a belief regarding some fact or phenomenon of experience. A store-house of all knowledge that resides in human mind from the very beginning, it attempts to explain how the world was created or why the world is the way that it is. Like allegory, myth usually is symbolic and extensive, including an entire work or story; though it no longer is necessarily specific to a single culture and pervasive in that culture.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, rooting, mythological, consciousness

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande holds a place of singular distinction among the Indian writers writing in English. In her fictional world, she raises voice of the suppressed woman-class who is also the creation of God and the role assigned to her by him is also superior but the attitude of her counterpart and society has reduced her to the pathetic condition. She portrays a positive journey of her female characters from silence to speaking and from self surrendering to asserting identity. In brief, her women characters break their age-old silence.

Shashi Deshpande, born on 19th of August, 1938 in Dharwad, in Karnataka, India, is the daughter of the renowned Sanskrit scholar, Adya Rangacharya, better known as Shriranga. She never planned, dreamt or had an ambition of becoming a writer; it was something she accidentally fell into. She was born in a writer/teacher's family and lived in a home in which the intellectual life mattered ^[1]. Her home was full of books. She was very fond of reading books since her childhood. Her passion for words was so great that she read all the dictionaries at home- Hindi-English, Sanskrit-English, German-English, French-English; she read them as one would read novels. In her childhood she had read Tolstoy, Jane Austen, Angela Brazil, Marie Corelli, Dickens, Dumas and so on.

Shashi Deshpande always thought of becoming a railway guard, a bank employee, a librarian etc. But writing was never a part of her dreams ^[2]. The first thing she wrote in her life was for competition for children organized by the *Illustrated Weekly*; and won a price – a beautiful shiny book called *Padro Picks Coffee in Brazil*. Once in her school days, an English teacher asked the class to write a story out of an outline given to them, she made a very long story out of it, with a great deal of dialogue. Then the teacher looked curiously at her and asked where she had got it from.

Mythological Consciousness

Myth is a traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a fundamental type in the world view of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society. It is a popular belief or story that has become associated with a person or institution, especially one considered to illustrate a cultural ideal or a fiction or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology ^[1]. It can be also defined as a story about superhuman beings of an earlier age, usually of how natural phenomena or social customs came into existence.

Myths includes the experience of so many people and generations and impart knowledge at various levels i.e. cultural, social, religious, psychological etc. Sometimes, they authorize the cultural institutions of a tribe, a city, a nation by connecting them with universal truths. They are the constant elements of values in the products of human civilization, particularly in religion and literature. To myths neither time can stale nor can age whither. They 'remain ageless, inexhaustible, invincible in timeless primordiality, in a past that proves imperishable because of its eternally repeated rebirths' ^[1]. Nineteenth century anthropologists explained myth in varying and often mutually exclusive terms: the myth was an early type of scientific theory, a dim groping after philosophical truth, or a garbled version of historical events; in short, a mistaken statement of facts about the outside world. Contemporary psychology looks on myth as indirect statement of facts about the interior world, in which psychological events are enacted as a story. About the origin of myths *The Book of Knowledge* says:

When primitive man first sought to understand how the world had come to be as it is, and how the sun, moon and stars followed their regular course, he invented stories of beings

like himself but immeasurably greater and immensely more powerful. According to some of these stories, or myths as they are called, one such being had originally created man, and taught him what to eat, how to use fire to cook his food, and other useful things.

Myths of these kinds have been traced among the ancient civilization of Babylonia and Egypt, and many are still current among backward tribes. But it was the Greeks, who were a nation of poets, who contributed the most powerful stories of Gods and heroes, and it is their mythology that has made the deepest impression in literature ^[2].

The main characters in myths are usually gods or supernatural heroes. As sacred stories, myths are endorsed by rulers and priests and closely linked to religion. In the society in which it is told, a myth is usually regarded as a true account of the remote past. In fact, many societies have two categories of traditional narrative – (1) 'true stories', or myths, and (2) 'false stories', or fables, myths generally take place in a primordial age, when the world had not yet achieved its current form. They explain how the world gained its current form and how customs, institutions, and taboos were established. Likewise, legends and folktales are closely associated with myths and really it is very difficult to put a line of demarcation among them but legends retain in them the heroic actions of all those who perform Hercules task and serve the humanity at large in the recent past. Folktales are picked up from *lok* (mass of people) and they also enrich our knowledge about the thinking, living and behavioural pattern of the people including their taboos and customs. Unlike myths, folktales can take place at any time and any place, and they are not considered true or sacred even by the societies that tell them. Against it, legends are stories that are traditionally considered true; however, they are set in a more recent time. Also, legends generally feature humans as their main characters, whereas myths generally focus on superhuman characters.

The distinction between myth, legend and folktale is meant simply as a useful tool for grouping traditional stories. In many cultures, it is hard to draw a sharp line between myths and legends. Instead of dividing their traditional stories into myths, legends, and folktales, some cultures divide them into two categories – one that roughly corresponds to folktales, and one that combines myths and legends. Even myths and folktales are not completely distinct: a story may be considered true, and therefore a myth, in one society, but considered fictional, and therefore a folktale in another society. In fact, when a myth loses its status as part of a religious system, it often takes on traits more typical of folktales, with its formerly divine characters reinterpreted as human heroes, giants, or fairies.

One among the various theories which deal with the origin of myths claims that myths are distorted accounts of real historical events. According to it, storytellers repeatedly elaborate upon historical accounts until the figures in those accounts gained the status of gods. Some theories propose that myths began as allegories. According to one theory, myths began as allegories for natural phenomena: Apollo represents fire, Poseidon represents water and so on and so forth. According to another theory, myths began as allegories for philosophical or spiritual concepts, e.g. Athena represents wise judgment, Aphrodite represents desire etc. the 19th

century Sanskritist Max Muller supported an allegorical theory of myth. He believed that myths began as allegorical descriptions of nature, but gradually came to be interpreted literally, for example, a poetic description of the sea as 'raging' was eventually taken literally, and the sea was then thought of as a raging god. Some thinkers believe that myths resulted from the personification of inanimate objects and forces. According to these thinkers, the ancients worshipped natural phenomena such as fire and air, gradually coming to describe them as gods. For example, according to the theory of mythopoeic thought, the ancients tended to view things as persons, not as mere objects; thus, they described natural events as acts of personal gods, thus giving rise to myths. According to the myth-ritual theory, the existence of myth is tied to ritual. In its most extreme form, this theory claims that myths arose to explain rituals. This claim was first put forward by the biblical scholar William Robertson Smith. According to Smith, people begin performing rituals for some reason that is not related to myth; later, after they have forgotten the original reason for a ritual, they try to account for the ritual by inventing a myth and claiming that the ritual commemorates the events described in that myth. The anthropologist James Frazer had a similar theory. Frazer believed that primitive man starts out with a belief in magical laws; later, when man begins to lose faith in magic, he invents myths about gods and claims that his formerly magical rituals are religious rituals intended to appease the gods.

As the myth is unique, so it is universal. Mythical events exert a decisive influence on subsequent history; they are prototypical and explanatory, providing the clue to many like experiences, and their original. From the time memorial myths are integral to every society and express the greater truths of human life. An intensive study of myths regarding its origin and its meaning and implications on human life has been developing in the west, especially since the eighteenth century. However, much of its material has come from the study of the Greek and Roman classics, from which it has also derived some of its methods of interpretation. The growth of philosophy in ancient Greece further developed the allegorical interpretations of myth, i.e. finding other or supposedly deeper meaning hidden below the surface of mythical texts. Such meaning usually involve natural phenomena or human values. In the eighteenth century, the Romantic's growing fascination with language family, the study of Sanskrit, and the growth of comparative studies, especially in history and philosophy, were all part of a trend that included the study of myth. The relevance of Indo-European studies to an understanding of Greek and Roman mythology was carried to an extreme in the work of Friedrich Max Muller, a German Orientalist, who was moved to Britain and did important research on comparative linguistics. In his view, expressed in *Comparative Mythology* (1856), the mythology of the original Indo-European people had consisted of allegorical stories about the working of nature, in particular such features as the sky, the sun, and the dawn.

Interest in myth was greatly motivated in Germany by Friedrich von Schelling's *Philosophy of Mythology*, which argued that myth was a form of expression, characteristic of a particular stage in human development, through which men imagine the absolute. Many scholars have adopted a

psychological approach because of interest aroused by the theories of Sigmund Freud. Subsequently, new approaches in sociology and anthropology have continued to encourage the study of myth.

One of the most important writers about myth from a psychological standpoint was Sigmund Freud. In his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he designated a phenomenon called the 'Oedipus Complex', i.e. the male child's repressed desire for his mother and a corresponding wish to supplant his father. According to Freud, this phenomenon was detectable in dreams and myths, fairy tales, folktales – even in jokes. Later, in *Talem and Tabu* (1913) Freud suggested that myth was the distorted wish – dreams of entire people. He saw the Oedipus Complex as a memory of a real episode that had occurred in what he termed the 'primal horde', when sons oppressed by his father, had revolted, had driven out or killed him, and had taken his wife for themselves. The relevance of Freud's investigations to the study of myth lies in his view that the formation of mythic concepts does not depend on cultural history. Instead, Freud's analysis of the psyche posited an independent, trans-historical mechanism, based on a highly personal biologic conception of man. The French anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss, whose extensive work with South American tribal societies has yielded extraordinary analysis, argued that the meaning of myths lies not in their manifest content but rather in their underlying structure of relations, which typically works to mediate between polar extremes. In other words, the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction. Ultimately, this leads Levi Strauss to the notion that the structure of myths is identical with that of the human mind.

Deshpande also goes back to Ramayana when she feels that Jaya's consciousness needs a comparison with the classical Indian concept of sin and retribution:

Dashrath was not directly involved in crime, for he killed the innocent boy by mistake; yet, he was to be punished. Jaya feels that she, too, is to be punished even if she is not directly involved in crime. She cannot be spared on the ground that she was blind to Mohan's activities. Jaya attempts to place her in the background of India's cultural history.

Deshpande's interpretation of the tale about the crow and the sparrow gives a unique touch to the novel. The bed-time story remembered by Jaya in *That Long Silence* is about a wise sparrow who builds her nest of wax in which no outsider is allowed to enter even at the time of any problem. The stupid crow in the story has his nest made of dung which is washed away during rain, shivering and soaked in the cold, the crow knocks at the door of the sparrow's house and requests her to let him in. The sparrow keeps him waiting in the rain outside for a long time saying that she is feeding her babies and is busy with other jobs.

Deshpande's characters too relate their lives and situation with the various myths and legend. It helps the novelist illustrate the thoughts and feelings of the character. Thus Deshpande has used the myths, existing tales and previous literary work for highlighting her views in *That Long Silence*.

Most of the Indian novels that deal with woman's issues offer a marginal treatment of the subject or end up glorifying the stereotypical virtues on Indian woman like patience, devotion and silent acceptance. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi

Deshpande is a totally different novel in the sense that it reveals the myth of man's absolute superiority and the myth of woman being a martyr and an ideal of all virtues. The novel is based on the problems faced by a career woman. Sarita (called Saru) is a two-in-one woman who in the daytime is a successful doctor and at night "a terrified trapped animal" in the hands of her husband, Manohar (called Manu) who is an English teacher in a third-rate college. The novel opens with Saru returning her father's house after fifteen years – a place she had once sworn never to return to – unable to bear the sexual sadism of her husband. The rest of the novel is remembrance of things past and a brief confession to the father with whom she had hardly communicated before. So the narrative moves from presents to past and vice versa. The stay in her father's house gives her a change to review her relationship with the husband, her dead mother, her dead brother Dhruva and her children, Renu and Abhi. Though she remains unchanged till the end she has a better understanding of herself and others. This gives her the courage to confront reality. The dark no longer holds any terror to her.

The novel *The Binding Vine* is a normal analysis of several tragedies in the life of different women. Shashi Deshpande examines lives of half a dozen women who become hysteric, escapist, sacrificial goats and she also discusses the compulsions which compel them to silence, suicide or death. The novel occupies a special place in all the works of Shashi Deshpande in the sense that it presents especially the women's world. Men are not entirely absent here, but they make their presence felt simply by the power they exercise over the women, especially over their wives and daughters. There are five pairs of mother-daughter namely Inni-Urmi, Mira's Mother-Mira, Shakutai-Kalpana, Akka-Vanna, Vanna-Mandira and their relationship between them is based on some sort of misunderstanding or dissension.

Urmi imagines Mira's relationship with the male poet whom she admired, Venu, in terms of this insoluble distance; it is parallel to her own relationship with Aju and Vanna with her father. The song Vanna remembers at the very beginning of the third part of novel also ties the stories together: Why use *Kaaajal* when the eyes are filled with the vision of Ghanshyam? Ghanshyam is another name for Krishna, the mythical Mirabai's idol, and another version of Kishore, the name of Mira's son. The mythical Mirabai wrote poems out of sincere love which have become part of a sacred devotional poetry and song. The Mira who is Urmi's mother-in-law wrote out of pain and abuse and jealously guarded her privacy. The song ties Mira to Venu and to Vanna's fascination for the unnamed singer who, long ago, sang a song in the college gardens.

Deshpande does not simply renew in order to reinterpret ideal figures of women, but to investigate how unrealistic those prescriptions are and to negotiate between mythical and modern images. Urmi invokes the figure of the patient and suffering Shakuntala (the faithful wife of Dushyant) and that of Mirabai (the devotee of the deity Krishna) as models who shadow the real and complex lives of the modern Kalpana and Mira. Deshpande's quest is to rediscover the potential of these so-called icons as flesh-and-blood human beings in *The Binding Vine* as well as in her other novels.

I think a number of us do that in India all the time; we relate a

great deal of our personal lives, our daily lives, to the myths. We find parallels as a matter of course. And we do this with all the myths, any myth that seems appropriate, whether were originally about men or women. In that sense it is a part of a language, a grammar that one knows and understands, rather than a conscious literary device ^[3].

The novel *A Matter of Time* represents three generations. The first generation is represented by Kalyani, the grandmother; the second generation by Sumi, the mother; and the third represented by Arundhati (Aru), the daughter. All three generations have their own values. The novel begins with Gopal's walking away from home. Gopal, Sumi's husband, emerges to be more powerful character than any of these women in the novel. Without him, we cannot think of a perfect developed novel ^[4].

Shashi Deshpande reinterprets history and myths. She thinks that there is a problem with myths, which are also written by men, that women were never allowed into the main stream and had no voice in the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* or the *Puranas*. She has reinterpreted the stories of mythological women like Sita, Draupadi and Kunti giving them a liberated voice in her stories. In her short stories, she lends voice to characters from epics and in the process shows a new facet of their lives. One such story explores the feelings of Sita on her desertion by Rama. Deshpande says, what stirred her was the "contrast between the young girl, whose innocence made this going away with her husband a joyous adventure and the woman, older, mature, soon to be a mother, once again getting ready for exile ^[5]."

I looked at the incidents that were in the Mahabharata through Amba's eyes and saw her anger, her utter disgust of the games men play, of her despair at having become a pawn in their games. In my story, her 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 ^[6].

The point is that all these stories in myths have been created by men to fulfill their various needs. There is the eternal child to be protected and controlled, the self-sacrificing mother to nurture and cherish the child, the chaste partner to guarantee exclusive rights of the man as well as an undoubted paternity of the children and the temptress to titillate and provide sexual gratification ^[7].

Conclusion

To conclude, Shashi Deshpande has created a familiar world a new in which authentic experiences of the interior landscape of Indian women is powerfully projected through the devices of myths and legends. The literary form of myth preserves its symbolic value which transcends the historical surface. Myths show the deep and active interest that man has taken in the world and in himself. Through myths man has made the attempt to link and interpret the one by the other. It expresses the reality in an expressive metaphor. It tries to show up some phase of experience in its totality. For the women writers like Shashi Deshpande, most of the mythological worlds are shattered to build up new worlds from their perspective. The myths used by Deshpande are seen to be relevant to her vision of life. Thus she can be said to be making innovations by giving the myths a new organic significance and stature in the modern world from her outlook. Deshpande makes extensive

use of mythical allusions and parallels in her fiction. All along it is the woman's point of view that is presented but there is hardly any trace of sentimentalizing or overdramatizing of woman's issues. She has created a familiar world a new in which authentic experiences of the interior landscape of Indian women is powerfully projected through devices including the reinterpretation of myths, folklores and so on.

References

1. Carl Gustav Jung, Karoly Kerényi. Introduction to a Science of Mythology, London, 1950, p. 9.
2. Gordon Stowell, ed. The Book of Knowledge, (London: The Waverley Book Company Ltd., n.d.), vol. 5, p. 312.
3. Shashi Deshpande. Shashi Deshpande Talks to Lakshmi Holmstrom. The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande ed. R. S. Pathak, New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998, p. 245.
4. Ibid., p. 246.
5., "Afterward", *The Stone Women and Other Stories* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 2000), p. 91.
6. "Writing from the Margin and Other Essays" (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 91.
7. Ibid., p. 90.