

Discovering the Female Voice in Shashi Deshpandey's *The Stone Women*

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Abstract

Gender disparity is a rampant phenomenon in India. Despite striking progress made by the country in different fields, the nation still faces gaping imbalances in male and female expectancy, wages, educational and professional opportunities, freedom of choice, expression and much more. The present paper attempts to highlight the bias faced by a major cross section of our population called women since ancient times. For this purpose, I have taken up an analysis of select stories from *The Stone Stories* by Shashi Deshpande which highlight prominent women characters in the great epic *Mahabharata*. The stories are "The Stone Women", "The Inner Rooms", "And What Had Been Decided?" and "The Day of the Golden Deer". These tales are primarily women centred. Despite belonging to the age of Lord Krishna, such eminent women do not escape victimization. The writer lends her own voice to these women characters who are seminal players in the *Mahabharata*. By doing so, she allows them to explain their predicament and also, she tries to negotiate a deserving place for them in her stories.

Keywords: Disparity; Gender; Patriarchy; Victimization; Voice.

The twentieth century was categorical for Indian Writing in English as it brought to light gender discrimination against Indian women. Many women writers wielded the power of their pen to pinpoint this long standing anomaly in our society. For them, it was sheer hypocrisy to assert ourselves as independent when one half of our population i.e. women, were subjugated. Shashi Deshpande is a name that needs no elaboration in this regard. She wrote prolifically to exhibit the disparity which Indian women faced for being women. The present paper attempts to highlight the bias faced by this major cross section of our population since ancient times. For this purpose, I have taken up an analysis of select stories from

the novel, *The Stone Women* by Shashi Deshpande which highlights prominent women characters in the great epic, *Mahabharata*. The stories are "The Stone Women", "The Inner Rooms", "And What Had Been Decided?" and "The Day of the Golden Deer". Though drawn from Indian mythology, the female characters are represented in the context of the modern assertive woman. Their effort to assert themselves against male domination gives voice to the entire women folk placed in similar circumstances.

Shashi relates the past to find its meaning in the present. She does this by approximating the myths to the contemporary women's experience and thus reinterprets them. The book takes its title from the first story which centres around the carved female figures on the stone edifice of the temple. The images represent in a way the female community, both of the past and the present. The deified women characters of these stories show great forbearance as well as a strong will to assert. These are the qualities which relate these mythological women to their modern counterparts. These tales are primarily women centred. They honestly portray the sufferings, disappointments and frustrations of the protagonists. Despite belonging to the age of Lord Krishna, such eminent women who figure in this prominent Indian epic, do not escape victimization. Stories like "The Inner Rooms", "And What Has been Decided ?" show women as physically present but lacking a voice. Hence, the writer lends her own voice to Amba, Sita and Draupadi. All of them hold seminal importance in the book. By doing so, she allows them to explain their predicament. The stories also offer her scope for moral and psychological analysis i.e. focus on the inner life of the characters. The book is a compilation of incisive short stories based on the characters in this great Indian epic. Deshpande had herself confessed that she chose the *Mahabharata* because of the nuances and complexities of its characters.

In the opening story "The Stone Women", the narrator describes the stone carvings thus : "They're Women, lush bodied, high breasted, women ... leaning provocatively out of them, towards us...Women in all kinds of poses - looking into the mirror, doing their hair, playing on musical instruments, dancing, hunting" (Deshpande 11). This story sets the ball rolling for the other tales to follow. Presenting women in their voluptuous forms concretely, displays the male perception of women. The female narrator of the story is aghast at "the joyous, playful, narcissistic existence of these women" (Deshpande 11). This story juxtaposes the past with the present. If in the past, men viewed women as a romantic sport, the present is also not much different. The narrator's message is that unless the woman today is watchful, she too runs the risk of being turned into a stone

woman, “ a woman frozen for all time into a pose she has been willed into by her creator” (Deshpande 15).

In four of the stories of *The Stone Women*, the writer goes back to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the two great literary sagas of the nation. Their core stories are more than 3000 years old and unfold several tales in turn. A stark feature of these tales is its women who lack a voice. For example, in “A Day of the Golden Deer”, Sita becomes the mouthpiece of Shashi. In this way, she allows Sita to explain her crisis and turmoil. 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, myths are all the more powerful as they have been maintaining an unbroken tradition. The credit for creating role models for our women goes primarily to them. The fair sex in our country is expected to be as pure as Sita, as loyal as Draupadi, as beautiful as Laxmi, bestower of abundance as Annapurna, unwavering in devotion as Savitri and the epitome of strength as Durga. In short, a complete jackpot for men, the privileged gender. The latter are exempted from the need to conform to such roles or any other stereotypes unlike their less privileged counterparts.

This takes us to an important factual discovery that myths have been created, nurtured and interpreted by men, primarily to fulfil their basic need – to control women, their destiny, character and sphere of social interaction. Women still dream through the dreams of men. Gods made by males are the gods they worship. The search for self, self analysis and a probe into the existential problems of women are the recurrent themes of the present work in question as well as other literary creations by Shashi. Traditional Indian society limits a woman’s development and growth. She has to abide by many rules and regulations as she is controlled by men throughout her life. *The Stone Women* attempts to analyse this relationship of woman with man within the ambit of society and family. Shashi browses the minds of Amba, Sita and Draupadi with a woman’s point of view.

With great precision, she dwells on their complex psychology that has been perpetually walled and restricted by the dynamics of many don’t’s. In “The Inner Rooms”, the writer looks at some incidents of the *Mahabharata* through Amba’s eyes. It depicts the plight of her two sisters, Amba and Ambalika. The three sisters are abducted by no less a titan than the virtuous Bheeshma, so that they can all become queens of the king, Vichitravirya. Revealing the shameless dance of patriarchal supremacy, mighty men like Bheeshma play such chauvinistic games to overpower the Am-

bas in the present world too. She expresses her anger and utter disgust at the games men play. She articulates her despair and anguish at becoming a helpless pawn in their hands. Bhishma – for the sake of his oath, Salva – in the name of defeat and Vichitravirya – for having been humiliated, all reject Amba. She feels totally dejected when Salva refuses to accept her as his wife, saying that since he had been defeated by Bheeshma, she rightfully belonged to him. He would face public ignominy if he took her then for his wife. This marks the turning point in the story as now, Amba is transformed into a woman with a mind of her own who questions unlicensed male authority. The realization that she can decide and act on her own, marks the turning point in the story.

In fact, a really cruel and unpardonable treatment is meted out to her. Reduced to utter shame, she mulls over the questions of honour and dishonour, right and wrong. “What are these but words used by men to cover their real emotions” (20). With nowhere to go, she is forced “to exist and not to be seen, to speak and not to be heard” (21). It is being like a child again, trapped in those inner rooms where the whole world was a closed chapter for her, where her tears and protests were meaningless as they went unnoticed by the outside world. The story reflects the tortured sensibility of a woman who refuses to come to terms with male domination. Instead of living a life of humiliation and compromise, she prefers to embrace death.

Once she is out, she is amazed to find the freedom she had never known before. A sense of peace descends on her as she realizes her folly in letting her happiness be controlled by others. She feels a fleeting pity for her sisters whom 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). Draupadi is another reputed character from the *Mahabharata*. Exploring the psyche of this great lady may have been a fascinating journey for Shashi. In “And What Had Been Decided?”, she sees her as a spirited, headstrong, young girl, falling in love with Arjuna, the super archer. The latter, dressed as a Brahmin, wins her hand in marriage with his heroic feats. Draupadi quietly follows her object of love, totally oblivious of the others with him. She is unaware that her husband was a Kshatriya.

Had her wedding occurred only with Arjuna, matters would have rested. But, that was not to be. Since their mother, Kunti, unknowingly utters that all five brothers must share equally amongst themselves whatever they

had got, Draupadi becomes the common wife of all the five Pandavas. According to Vrinda Nabar, she is "a singular example of polyandry in marriage, which was not in common practice in India" (Nabar 116). But, she is never satisfied. Not even one of her spouse out of five can see the woman in her who is "hungry for love, for passion" (32). She was Yudhisthira's queen but not his beloved as he always kept a distance with her. Bhima treated her like a "fragile, precious flower he is afraid to pluck" (32). Nakul and Sehdeva were only boys. She wanted to reserve all her feelings for Arjuna as it was he who had won her in a contest. She wanted him as a beloved, not as a friend. However, Arjuna too, withdrew in his shell as he did not want what he could not share with his brothers. The story also deals with the vexation and anguish of Draupadi after the infamous disrobing attempt by the Kauravas in the court openly.

Her five husbands do nothing to save her or later, to retrieve her honour. Hence, she decides to assert herself in order to remind them of her essential dignity as a woman and a human. Her protest was rooted in the unfortunate fact that a woman's insult was treated so lightly. By chance, this woman happened to be the Queen of Indraprastha and was 'blessed' with not one but five husbands! It is only in that one year of disguised hiding when Draupadi is truly free, all by herself. "Each day complete in itself, ending where it began, enclosing us in its security. And I going to bed each night, happy to be myself, to have no one to share my bed" (33). In the notorious disrobing scene, she questions the place of Indian womanhood in the Dharma of the land. Why was this Dharma different for men and women? How could Yudhisthira treat her as a mere pawn after he had lost all in the game of dice? Till date, all these questions have remained unanswered.

No brother of Yudhisthira raised a finger at this highly objectionable act of putting Draupadi at stake. When she is also lost, no brother comes to her rescue. Later, when Lord Krishna offers to go to Hastinapura to ask for half the kingdom on behalf of the Pandavas, she intrudes by reminding everyone of the humiliation she had suffered in the assembly and the big promises made by Arjuna and Bhima. But, all the five remain stoic saying, "Peace is always better than war" (26). At this juncture, Lord Krishna tries to soothe Draupadi by saying that he would "never press for peace with dishonour" (27). He convinces her by promising her that her honour would be safe in his hands. Finally, the eldest brother retorts, "The Queen wants war and she will have it" (33). This statement is actually a bitter remark on the part of a spouse whose wife has been publicly shamed. It speaks openly of the double standards and complacency of men when it

comes to retrieving the lost honour of their wives. It is as if it was only Panchaali's decision to have a war and so, was the root cause of all the mass carnage that followed. From the men's viewpoint, the responsibility of the Great War lay upon her solely.

The frustration in her life had seeds in Kunti advising her five sons to share equally amongst themselves what they had got home. Was it right for Draupadi to marry all the five brothers? Such a decision left her with no physical or emotional space for herself. What was Kunti's contribution in her daughter - in - law's predicament? It goes to the credit of the writer that she has attempted to shed fresh light on this classical epic. Being a woman herself, she becomes better equipped to understand and represent the viewpoints of the women characters in question. The idea is to educate the modern woman by reincarnating these mythical women. She endows them with courage as they can speak now, protest, choose and act. They are the modern literary versions of Sita, Amba and Draupadi who can become the torch bearers for the modern afflicted woman. Though these characters are mythological, Shashi modernizes their grief. She builds up their persona gradually by bringing to the fore, episodes that had shaped their lives. Her epic women are those who speak to our hearts, whom we can understand and sympathise with.

In another important story "The Day of the Golden Deer", she shows the emergence of Sita who speaks out against social barriers. By renouncing her husband and lord, Rama, she questions his prudence in raising a finger at her purity like any common male. While giving up her claim on him as her spouse, she says, "It is time for me to do so, to give up the idea of perfection in any man, in any human" (73). She compares her trial by Lord Rama to her abduction by the powerful demon, Ravana. She confesses that she had felt the iron grip of the demon king on that fateful day when she was kidnapped by him. She feels it yet again when her husband takes such a harsh stand on her. She feels the "alien hands on me, cruel, hard and hurting. With an effort greater than I have ever made in my life, I take hold of myself" (62). When she is told that the idea behind renouncing her or giving proof of her purity were actions goaded by a sense of duty and right conduct which Rama as king had towards his subjects, she once again articulates the female voice by speaking freely.

This is a weapon discovered by Sita only recently. Now, with free expression of her feelings, she is ready to face the world. She retorts and rightfully too, "What happens to those who are crushed under his chariot of righteousness?" (68) Her power of speech is used by her in self defence as

well as to intimate the audience that she is firmly taking a stand for herself. Her patience has been tested enough. She responds by taking control of her life now. The writer recasts Sita so that we can "see Sita as a human being" (Sree 157). Sita realizes that forgiveness is a jewel of the courageous. Hence, she forgives her husband as she pities him. She symbolizes the traditional woman of yester years and of today who is finally breaking her cocoon of protection and taking control of herself. She emerges as a much more awakened soul than before, one who has shed off her illusions and misconceptions which enable her to see herself and others in a more mature light.

Sita begins to understand male psyche much better. She now understands that "The golden deer of perfection ... is nothing but a mirage, a delusion" (Deshpande 72). Fear, insecurity, sorrow and self-pity have been the real demons to have kept women in exile so far. Sita is all set to exile them from her life. Sita has been a role model for women since ancient times. Shashi projects her in a way that she redefines her role in the novel and arrives at her own rationale in the end of the story. She revises her long harnessed emotion of love, that one can truly love just one's self. This Sita that Shashi has created, can also be interpreted as a possible exemplary in present times for the modern woman, keeping in mind the complexities of today's world.

To conclude, this type of creative writing has allured Shashi to create her own fictional world, a safe place where she can explore a wide range of experiences, especially with regard to a woman's status in society. Nirmala Prakash in her essay "From Feminine to Feminist Consciousness", lauds her efforts in writing such a novel where her mythological women are placed in difficult situations. She taps their feminine consciousness from the viewpoint of a modern woman. In her effort to retell mythology to her readers, Deshpande tries to create a space for these mythical women, a space which they were long deprived of. She relates the past to find its meanings in the present. Shashi foregrounds the immense influence that myths exercise on Indian life and psyche. She also makes her women characters credible through the authenticity of the mythical context.

The writer has creatively and meaningfully reinterpreted these mythical characters so that we can find a fresher knowledge of ourselves in them. Through them, we can discover what is relevant to our lives today. The contexts, figures and situations are mythological but the responses and reactions of her protagonists are akin to those of contemporary women. Her women yearn for self assertion. Their protest becomes the protest of

the entire womanhood against centuries of subjugation. According to Seema Suneel, she sensitively portrays the lot of such women in her stories. Mythological or modern, her women are all versions placed in different ages and situations.

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