Myth, Tradition and Indian Beliefs in Shashi Deshpande's "The Dark Holds No Terrors"

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is one of India's most well-known novelists today. Women's writing in India has a shorter history than male writing, but we are seeing a rise in the number of women authors whose fiction is being recognized internationally. They have won a slew of national and international awards and grants, and it now appears that women's writing will rise to prominence shortly as they catch up to their male counterparts. While many other women authors, such as Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Santha Rama Rao, Attia Hussain, Padmini Sen Gupta, Nargis Dala, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Gita Mehta, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, enrich Indian English Literature, Deshpande occupies a special place She is one of the few authors working today who incorporates literary allusions, myth, and mythology into her work, effortlessly blending it with earlier results.

Deshpande has used Indian myths, legends, and people in many novels as metaphors for events, incidents, happenings, and characters. In many of her books, she incorporates Western folktales. Shashi Deshpande's writings, especially her novel "The Dark Holds No Terrors" (1980), paint a startlingly vivid picture of Indian womanhood's inner world. For too long, it has been made to stay quiet. Deshpande's use of myth and folklore in her novels exemplifies the decolonization of the Indian literary imagination. These devices are handy to

the author for illuminating the inner world of women's minds since many of her novels contain female protagonists.

Keywords: Myth, Folklore, Indian Tradition and Culture, Superstition, Rituals, Patriarchy, Subjugation

One must first consider their socio-historical roots to comprehend the relationship between feminine stereotypes and the myths they are based on. A myth is a traditional, traditionally ancient tale about supernatural entities, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a basic form of people's worldviews by illustrating aspects of the natural world or delivering a society's psychology, traditions, or values. The term "myth" has been used so often in world literature over the last few decades that it has become a literary cliche. Apart from literary criticism, the word has a range of meanings in sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and comparative religion, with each area of research imbuing it with its own set of connotations. However, its use in literature has grown recently, and critics are more interested in it than anyone else.

One fundamental question that might arise here is why myths are essential in the study of literature, why myths function so effectively in modern literary works, and why are myths and legends such an essential factor in writers' thinking patterns. The consistency of timelessness and antiquity may be the first and most important reason. Myths are ancient, far-off stuff, so they naturally enchant and charm modern people. Despite their distance from contemporary reality, the allure of Indian mythological stories has a kind of fundamental significance. Indian authors know this and have recreated myths using their literary resources.

Her novels portray Indianness, Indian myths and legends, rites and practices, beliefs and superstitions, conventions and traditions believably and successfully. When Sarita returns to her parent's house, she recalls the 'Krishna Sudama' tale from the epic 'The Mahabharata,'

in which Krishna and his queen Rukmini run joyfully to greet a sad, rugged Sudama who stands at the palace gate. When Saru knocks on the door of her ancestral home, the story comes to mind, even though she is not Sudama in rags. She sees her dead mother standing in front of the tulsi, eyes closed, hands crossed, mouth moving, as if apologizing to the tulsi for her death before her husband. An Indian woman wishes to pass away as a 'Suhasini,' with her husband still alive. She sees a fading photograph of her grandfather, which she has never seen before. Maybe in a burst of patriotism, one of the smiling Gandhi and Nehru was put up. And a framed photograph of Krishna as a crawling child, chubby, solemn, and with a glint in her eyes. A real peacock feather is stuck on the infant's head, and the whole thing is done in finely stitched embroidery.

Sarita's mother, a shy woman who had almost given up reading, loved hearing her husband read passages from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata epics to her. Just the significant facts will matter to an uneducated woman who is sick and dying. Kamala's youth was characterized by a difficult and impoverished upbringing, marriage, the death of a beloved young son, and her daughter's estrangement. She was especially taken with the story of Duryodhana, the Kaurava king, at the end of the epic war when her husband read it to her.

This is a typical Indian middle-class home. Saru's room is given to Madhav, a first-year college student staying with her father for more than two years. Her father asks her to lie in the Puja room for a while, which is an inseparable part of a typical Hindu home. She lies down there with her eyes closed, enjoying the smells of oil, camphor, incense, and flowers. The room is bare now, but the pale ghosts of the old odours and the tarnished silver mango leaves hanging from the top of the doorway are the only indications that this had been a *puja* room once. She is surprised to see mealtime rituals very strictly followed by Madhav. She curiously observes:

> *He had removed his shirt and sat down on the plank, legs crossed, sacred thread prominent on his chest. Before starting his food, he did everything she had almost forgotten. Water in the cupped palm, the drops around the plate, bits of rice on one side of it. (Deshpande 30)*

Saru is well aware that she is not a caring daughter rushing home to console her bereaved father but is comforting herself by discussing her situation with her father. She feels compelled to speak with him to alleviate her isolation. But she understands that no one, not God, can console her. She, too, had gone to pujas, fasts, rituals, and mumbled prayers in the past with some hope. She recalls looking in the mirror on the almirah door as a child and expecting to see herself as beautiful. When she opens the almirah now, she sees all of the items that were once prized possessions for her as a child. She discovers a few bottles, one water bottle, small cups, the 'attar' tray, and the rose-water sprinkler brought out every year for the 'haldi-kumkums' festival. This was the point at which she surpassed her brother, Dhruva, in importance. She was the house daughter at the time, capable of applying attar to the backs of women's hands and discovering her mother's Banaras sari for haldi-kumkums, weddings, and thread ceremonies. For Dhruva's thread ceremony, her mother was determined to have the chanderi sari. However, neither the thread ceremony nor the chanderi saris were held after Dhruva's death. No pujas, haldi-kumkums, or weddings were held. She discovers another package of cotton and silk squares, traditionally used as auspicious gifts given to married women on ceremonial occasions in Indian culture.

She recalls being invited to a ceremony by a friend when she was eight months pregnant. The mother had performed all of the traditional rituals for her pregnant daughter, culminating in the gift of a sari and blouse piece, as well as coconut, pan-supari, and rice grains. Saru's eyes welled with tears as she witnessed the mother and daughter's closeness and intimacy. She'd never had anything like this before. As a result of her strained relationship

with her mother, she suffered a slew of hardships. During the Diwali festival, newly married girls are welcomed to their parents' homes with their husbands, according to Indian custom. Sarita, who married against her parent's wishes, was not lucky enough to be welcomed to her parent's home for festivals.

Diwali, Dussehra, Ganapati, Gudi Padwa, Makar Sankranti, Holi, and other festivals have become an inseparable part of Indian culture. The festival of Diwali is known as the "Festival of Lights." Holi is a traditional colour festival. Gudi Padwa is the name given on the first day of the New Year. The day of Dussehra is thought to be auspicious. On the auspicious day of Dussehra, Saru's consulting room was formally opened. She recalled little Ganpati immersion processions passing by their home, followed by the ringing of a brass bell and children's shrieks.: *Ganpati Bappa Morya, Pudchya varshi lavkar ya. (Deshpande 147).* Saru's relatives also observed this festival. There was Puran-Poli and a light still burning in front of Ganpati's niche, where a coconut took the place of the idol until the following day after Ganpati's immersion. Both of these events are social gatherings that bring people together. Not only are these festivals appealing to Indians, but so are casual encounters. They meet up on the spur of the moment, with no particular reason or plan. Saru recalls one chance encounter with Manu's colleague and wife. Saru always considers a casual meeting*:*

> *It's like a ballet or Bharat Natyam dance, these meetings between couples, between families, not with the beauty and rhythm of the dance, but with all its rigidity. It's as if we move on chalked lines, with no deviations allowed. The men slap each other on the back, feigning a greater intimacy than there is. Females smile and simper, talk about children and servants and coo at the children if they are present. And then, saying to one another with equal insincerity... Do visit us. You must come... we part, the smiles falling off*

> *our faces with remarkable rapidity, the women slipping smoothly into criticism and invective. (Deshpande 111).*

After Dhruva's death, Saru's mother stopped celebrating the Ganesh festival, but she kept the other gods in the puja room and continued to perform her morning puja. She had complete faith in her puja, which she regarded as a religion. There has never been a civilization in human history that somehow does not believe in religion. Man's faith in gods and goddesses, his puja worship, and his involvement in religious rituals and functions bring him peace of mind, inspiration, and encouragement. In Indian culture, religion has always played a significant role. Religion is important to Indians, and worshipping gods and goddesses is a religion for them. Religion is a force that influences and regulates human behaviour.

Saru used to accompany her mother to the temple every Friday, carrying a brass tray with flowers, coconut, and haldi and kumkum pots. She was never permitted to bear Devi's offerings on the brass tray for fear of losing it. Dropping Devi's offerings was considered a heinous crime, sacrilege, and disaster. Devi's mother was often thought to curse the woman who dropped the tray containing Devi's offerings. Devi's story uncomfortably enthralled Saru. Despite her apprehensions about Devi, she never skipped a Friday and went every week. The ringing of the temple bell, the curious echoes of the bell's sound, the scent of oil, camphor, and flowers, and the joyful babble of female conversation in the temple were all things she enjoyed and observed the similarity in women's expressions, behaviours, reactions, and sensibilities, all of which could be easily predicted.

In the temple, she had a terrifying yet unforgettable experience. She saw a middle-aged woman worshipping the Devi with one hand holding her tray of offerings and the other adding kumkum to Devi's forehead. The woman seemed to be a creature with a frightening mask-like face and popping eyes staring at the Devi when the tray dropped out of her hands.

She then started to revolve, slowly and strangely turning around. Her feet continued to thump, her hands flailing, her sari loosening, and her hair spinning around her horrifying face with frightful eyes. One of the temple women approached the spinning woman and applied kumkum to her forehead. The same thing was done by other women, including Saru's mother. Her face turned blood red as the kumkum and sweat mixed.

As a child, Saru was afraid of her and bolted into the open courtyard where women gathered in the evenings to listen to the man in the red shawl recite the 'Puranas' in a singing tone. She sat next to the black stone bull in the middle, touching the tiny stone bells that hung from his neck. The bull was also showered with kumkum and flowers between his delicate toes. Her mother came out after a while and gave her 'prasad.' Saru saw the same woman again, leaning against the pillar, her legs spread out in front of her, her face relaxed and empty, the kumkum on her forehead wiped away except for the normal mark between the brows, a sign of wifehood. Now with a gentle and smiling face, that lady gave her rock sugar as prasad. She was perplexed because she couldn't understand the woman, who, in her opinion, was divided into two separate beings. She had no idea what her mother was talking about when she said, *"The Devi entered into her"* (Deshpande 103).

Many Indians consider mythological tales and parables to be true. They are religious people. The Buddha's parable emphasizes the certainty of death. When a grieving mother of a deceased child approached Buddha for assistance, he was told, *get me a handful of mustard seeds from a house that has not known death... Learn the truth and be comforted. Death is an inescapable human condition (Deshpande 77)*. The mother was comforted that she would not see a house that had never seen death. The story's message is that death is unavoidable. We must continue until we exhale our last breath.

We must survive until it is time for us to leave. Mavshi, who is always at odds with Sudhir, her son, and her daughter-in-law, who only sees the world in black and white, finds

Aaru's mother a fortunate woman because she died as a 'Suhasini,' and because her death put an end to her plight and plight, Saru starts to hate her with her protests, her ignorance to everything but her interests, and the destruction of everything she owns, Mavshi, on the other hand, is disappointed and expresses his dissatisfaction by saying:

> *You're telling me nothing new, Saru. I know all of it. But tell me, you're a doctor and learn all about dying and living... and tell me this, Saru. Why am I, a fat, old, unwanted woman, still alive when he, who was so useful and much desired, was taken away? Why am I alive when he is dead? (Deshpande 77).*

As socio-cultural conditioning of a girl is still prevalent in Indian culture, Saru's vibrant existence is progressively stifled by her mother's relentless criticism and fault-finding. Saru is made to feel unsightly, unpleasant, and unwanted all the time. Her mother frequently reprimanded her daughter's appearance because she thought that a girl needed to be physically attractive in order to succeed in the world. Even natural maturing is forced to be humiliating. She is separated, served remotely in a different cup and plate, and prohibited from entering the house for three days. This treatment is a manifestation of the general male reaction to all things feminine. A girl is raised to feel different as she develops physically and made to be cautious about exposing her femininity to the family's male member.

The reader will sense how deeply ingrained values, myths, and attitudes are in this book and how one's psyche is tuned appropriately within socio-cultural norms, suffocating women's hopes and ambitions. Women are taught that to live in this oppressive society, and they must give up their individuality and become helpless. As a result, 'resistance' will exist alongside the exercise of 'power.' Deshpande's women are not rebellious, but they do question patriarchal socio-cultural norms. In her mature novels, where myth and folklore are used to preserve and illuminate storytelling, she makes the most subtle and successful use of mythology and folklore. Shashi Deshpande has re-imagined a familiar universe in which

authentic memories of Indian women's inner geography are vividly projected through myths and folktales.

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