

# **A Reinterpretation of Hindu Myths in the Short Stories of Shashi Deshpande**

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## **Abstract**

The present paper reinterprets mythical Indian characters in the short stories of Shashi Deshpande. The Indian literature is incomplete without the discussion of myths and mythological stories. These stories teach the ethical values, customs and rituals to every person of the society. The characters of Mahabharata, Ramayana and Puranas are being reshaped, re-interpreted time to time according to the demand of situation. These characters are so famous that they have become like the heart bit of Indian masses. In the stories of Shashi Deshpande, the characters of the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and Puranas have been retold.

The primary focus of attention in the short stories of Shashi Deshpande is woman. She is able to redefine the role of Indian woman in present context. She has written so many stories which are based on the characters of women, from the epics. She makes a great relevance of myths in our day to day life. She shows the importance of those mythical women characters that have influenced the lives of today's men and women. The Vedas, the Puranas, the epics have been written by men and as a result the feelings and emotions of the women present in them are depicted from men's point of view. She has made an attempt and has asked question in many ways present in mythology and has also shown the psychological turmoil of the mythological women through her stories.

Indeed, myths sharpen the minds, emotions, opinions, thoughts and ideas of people. The characters from the epics and Puranas have become stereotypes. So many women writers have become the witness of exploring such myths and stereotypes. This is only because of growing strength of feminist thinking. Through such myths and mythological characters many writers have retold their own tales, experiences and notions in a small change. Shashi Deshpande has also presented the stories from the myths differently by breaking the stereotypical images of the characters. The irony is that the role models are held out only to women. Through many stories she discovers the myths what is relevant to our lives these days.

**Keywords:** myth, epic, reinterpretation, modernity, identity, suffering, repentance, re-examine, stereotype, mythology

### **Introduction**

With the help of the story **The Last Enemy** Shashi Deshpande shows her most imaginative power which produces an inner emotions of Duryodhana. It depicts how Duryodhana analyses and examines his own emotions. He is very much hated among common masses of India. She gives articulation to his agony and inner turmoil at the end of the war. Most of the stories of Shashi Deshpande give voice to the predicament of woman. Contrary to that she has become the mouthpiece of Duryodhana in the story. She opines:

He was as good as Arjuna, as strong as Bhima. His parents had always told him so, his brothers and his friends too. Yet he had known that if he had said it aloud I am not as good as them? And said, Duryodhana, a true Kshatriya does not brag. (Collected Stories Vol. II, 2003,15)

Shashi Deshpande's statement 'Duryodhana was no longer a villain, but a tragic figure cold lonely and alone proves Duryodhana as a fallen warrior. Unlike other human beings he has also all the frailties find in the story an amazing blend of myth and reality, anger and repentance, hero and villain. Duryodhana performs a great heroic deed here he comes ahead to give right, the eldest son of Kunti. Karna gets his right accidentally by

Duryodhana not by Pandavas. He dedicates his entire life for his friend Duryodhana and ultimately dies. After Karna's death he feels alone in the battlefield. His brothers, friends, and kinsmen are lying dead. He is shocked at treacherous killing of karna.

In the tyranny of time Duryodhana is in a lot of fear. His fear and hatred are the axis of the development of plot of the story. By renewing and reshaping his emotions and cleaning his thoughts. Duryodhana creates a space necessary for himself. Shashi Deshpande with her power of narrative skills celebrates the glory and ecstasy of Indian epics. The story redefines his present condition in context of his past anxieties. She maintains the sublimity in her expressions and avoids pedantic expressions.

The story **Inner Rooms** presents the mythical vein that articulates the feelings and emotional reaction of Amba, princess of Kashi from the epic Mahabharata. Amba along with her two sisters is abducted by Bhishma, as brides of Vichitravirya, the prince of Hastinapur, Bhishma, a great warrior, has always been considered as one of the biggest heroes of the Mahabharata. In the epic Mahabharata, Bhishma, grand old man is respected by both Pandavas and Kaurvas. He remains esteemed till now in the world for his ethical deed presented by him. The story shows the tragic life of Amba who is burning in sufferance and anguish. Amba is a princess of Kashi, an ancient Hindu Kingdom. She is in love with Salva, the king of Sauba. As the codes of marriage of those days, Amba along with her two sisters are in Swayamvara. A number of princes are waiting for the jaymal (garland) to be put by these princesses. When Bhishma abducted three sisters from Kashi Royal Court all the princes became only mute spectators before the might of Bhishma. The King of Sauba, Salva chases Bhishma to make Amba free but he was not able to stand before him. Amba's two sisters married the boy of Hastinapur, Vichitravirya. Having known that Amba is in love with another prince she has been sent to Salva who refused to accept her as he had lost her in the battle with Bhishma so he could not claim any right to the girl. Amba goes back to Bhishma and the king but the king refuses her by saying that the code of conduct stops him to marry a woman who is in love with another man. Now Amba decides to go to Bhishma who rejects saying that it would be a violation of his vow of life-long celibacy.

With the help of inner rooms the writer has manifested the truth that women in society don't have any access to the world of reality. The story of Amba in the epic Mahabharata is very clear. But the story of Amba narrated or retold by Shashi Deshpande is in a new version which interprets the inner trauma of Amba, her agony, anguish, despair and dishonor. She has been treated as a pawn in the game. She pines for pride and honour in a male dominated society but she gets only oppression and humiliation. She is not able to control her life. Finally, she decides to kill herself.

Thus, Amba, the legendary character of the Mahabharata cannot remain a daughter or become a wife and the fact is that she is tossed here and there. She is treated most inhumanly by Bhishma, Vichitravirya and Salva, Salva refused her because he was defeated by Bhishma, Vichitravirya because she was in love with Salva and Bhishma because of his pledge of celibacy. She thinks a woman has no authority to consider the matter concerning her own life because she was only a woman; she was to be disregarded and ignored.

By reinterpreting the myth it brings out the sad truth that most over literature is creation of men and women. It is really a sad thought on the circumstances of affairs. Amba's existence is deliberately reduced to nothing by the community of men. She realizes the bitter truth in her life. Amba becomes a lone figure in the story whose wish is only to commit suicide. Amba seems to be reincarnation of the new woman. The author looks at the incidents of the Mahabharata through Amba's eyes. She touches upon the delicate matter of sex. Amba feels pity for her other two sisters Ambika and Ambalika who remained in the palace of Vichitravirya to be the victim of nightly lustful assaults of their husband.

However, the title of the story is very symbolic. It indicates the dominance of male how females are surrounded and their voice remains inside the boundaries of the wall. Female's voice of protest is suppressed for the sake of social and moral security. The woman is supposed to live, with many restrictions and prohibitions imposed upon her by the man. It is very clear in the story that how Amba wanders here and there for the sake of her identity. She does not get justice and remains nameless. She pines for getting social relationship like daughter, wife and the like.

Shashi Deshpande has retold the story of Draupadi in the story **And What Has Been Decided?** She has given voice to Draupadi's anguish of being cheated, of having become pawn by their husbands, the Pandavas. The condition of Draupadi is against the morality of humanity. The story is about the thirteen years of exile including the year of disguise. The Pandavas, along with Krishna discuss for getting their rights. None of them now wants war. They want to establish peace. Lord Krishna becomes the messenger of peace and asks for at least five villages for Pandavas. At this decision, Draupadi becomes angry. She fails to understand that why they are begging for what their right is. From the very beginning she keeps on thinking about their actions and their plan to move ahead. She does not want to reconcile at the price of honour. She has in memory that how have Pandavas been cheated, insulted, and humiliated in the court of Dhritrashtra. She can memorise the incident took place and the way she has been treated. She begs for help to save her chastity and purity in the royal court of Hastinapur. She also remembers the oaths taken by her husbands. The talks of Pandavas disappoint her a lot. She wonders at the conversation of her five husbands. She shocks to know that a true Kshatriya is not able to get honour in the family for an oppressed woman. She taunts in the words of Shashi Deshpande:

I am Yudhishthira's queen not his beloved. He keeps a distance between us, a vast plain he will not cross as if he is afraid that if he reaches me, he will not find what he is looking for. And Bhima treats me like a fragile, precious flower he is afraid to pluck. He cannot see the woman in me, the woman hungry for love, for passion. And Nakul and Sahadev are only boys. But Arjuna...(243)

Draupadi's agony and pain mirrors her helplessness. She is shunned by her own husband. She can no longer control her emotions and anger. She becomes very eager to take revenge. She is not satisfied with the language spoken by Pandavas. The language is not of the Kshatriyas. She says that she cannot trust them because they gambled her away. She has been used as an object, a mere property that can be used at convenience. She was made a pawn in the gambling by her own husband who is the symbol of dharma and known as

Dharamraj. Yudhisthira is such a person who has never done any wrong and has not spoken ever in his life a wrong word.

Draupadi comes to know that her five husbands are planning for war. She feels that everyone wants war but they place the whole burden of blame on Draupadi. She is being made scapegoat for that. Her husbands do not want to take the guilt of killing the thousands of people in the war.

In the epic, the Mahabharata it seems that Draupadi is responsible for the horrible battle of Kurukshetra to avenge the wrong done to her. It is none but Draupadi who is quality for taking this deadly decision. But Shashi Deshpande has renewed and reinterpreted the character of Draupadi to see the readers the other side of this. One can think about the attitude of Draupadi how she suddenly becomes scary at her husbands' decision of war. The moment she peeps into the eyes of Lord Krishna, she watches an apparition of horror, death, agony and destruction of war. She is alarmed and terrified for her own family.

In the epic, Draupadi has been illustrated as an incarnation that comes out of fire. She has also been shown as a spirited woman full of pride but Shashi Deshpande has presented her in a different way. In the story she is a picture of a suffering wife. She feels deceived by Arjuna whom she has garlanded in svayamvara. She remembers that she married Arjuna but she has been imposed his other four brothers to accept along with him as her husband. She remarks:

It was a Brahmin youth I had garlanded and followed out of the svayamvara hall. I would have been satisfied to be the wife of that Brahmin boy; but that was not to be my destiny. I became the wife of five men, five princes, Kshatriyas. (239)

Retelling the story of Draupadi, Deshpande raises the question of the position of Indian womanhood in the land of the *dharma*. Through this journey of thoughts Draupadi unveils her plight and agony she suffers due to her dear ones. Thus, Shashi Deshpande, by creating such characters from the myth awakes the conscience of the people of India and the world.

The story ‘**Hear me, Sanjay**’ has been renewed by Shashi Deshpande. The story records a dialogue of Kunti with Arjuna. The author has very successfully tried to re-test the epic ‘The Mahavharata’ in the most skillful way. The story pours out her sufferings, her pain from the day she entered Hastinapur as Pandu’s wife. She suffers at the hands of her father, husband and providence. Kunti has been considered as the silent mother of the Pandava’s brothers in the epic. The story teller has given her voice to show her feelings. She opines that her father considering her a displeasing substance offers her away to his friend. Kunti’s actions are represented and given voice when she takes a walk to the king of Hastinapur, Dhritrashtra. The story takes place after the war is over. Kunti is going to join the King Dhritrashtra and the queen, Gandhari. They are going to the forest Vidur and Sanjay are also about to go the forest.

Shashi Deshpande has shown a woman who faces a lot of difficulties in her life and remains very silent. Her feelings of caring five young children and the marriage of Draupadi with all the five Pandavas remain untold. She bears everything calmly. She has to face the enmity between Duryodhana and her sons. When Kunti declares Draupadi the wife of all five sons she repents and cries out for Draupadi. Kunti further searches her own identity. From Pritha she becomes Kunti after the adoption of Kuntibhoja. The name Kunti she hates. Years later her first born son Karna appears before her eyes When she meets him as a grown up man, her son is very angry to her. Kunti is in such a clutch of time that she pines to her from son the word ‘mother’ but he never calls her so. Kunti is so helpless that she is not able to tell even the story of her own life. The story presents the agony of a mother who cannot utter the truth of her life. Shashi Deshpande shows her association with the river which is subtly hinted in this story. Deshpande’s Kunti does not want to be close to a river.

Thus she longs for the son Karna with whom she has not been permitted to assert her bond of mother-hood. All of sudden she remembers her husband, sons and family. She shows her pain with the suffering of Gandhari and Draupadi. She feels sorry as both of them loses their sons in the war. Kunti raises very important questions in the episode. Although

her questions have not been given much importance, her actions play a significant role, but no reasons or explanations are given for these actions.

Thus, by reinterpreting the myth of Kunti in the story **Hear me, Sanjay?** Shashi Deshpande brings out the sad truth about women characters of the epic Mahabharata. The story revolves around Kunti's grief and disaster she faces in her life. In the story Kunti appears to be a real woman who touches the heart of readers and deserves sympathy from each and all. The author has put life in the character of Kunti by giving her emotions a moving way. The writer is successful to break the stereotypical image of Kunti. Deshpande gives the theme a new version. Although women characters have been given zero existence in the epic but in the story of Shashi Deshpande they get entirely full existence.

By retelling the story of Sita, Shashi Deshpande shows her concern of the most unfortunate woman character of the great epic the Ramayana. The story of Sita has been presented by the story writer in **The Day of the Golden Deer**. With the help of this story Shashi Deshpande has given voice to Sita's emotions. Sita has been a true and obedient wife of Rama. In spite of knowing Sita's chaste Rama abandons her in the forest. She is not only an entire woman who has become the symbol of India's culture. Shashi Deshpande re-examines husband-wife relationship. The story explores the feelings of Sita on her desertion by Rama and her realization. She is sure that Rama can never do any wrong in his life. He should never be seen to do wrong. He has sacrificed Sita and left to her condition. She is shocked at this feeling. Although Sita of the Ramayana does not ask any question to Lord Rama what is being done by her husband. She thinks it the written verdict in her fate. Sita as a dutiful wife follows the path of her husband honestly. She has not ever questioned her husband's actions. But Shashi Deshpande's Sita does not believe in fate. She has power to ask questions and when it is necessary she even can revolt. Here in this story, she has broken the stereotype image of being an unquestioning wife. She breaks her silence. She not only asks some vital questions regarding her pride but also accuses her husband whose righteousness is wide spread. She considers Rama a man of superhuman quality. She remembers the glimpses of Vaali and the way Rama kills him treacherously. Sita blames

Rama of his wrong action of his killing of Vaali. She cannot stop her anguish when she is addressed by saying queen. She reveals her separate identity when she is told queen. She becomes furious because she has not been treated like a queen by the King. A husband breaks an eye of Jayanta for stinking Sita in her feet. This is only because being a husband not king. But now a man throws his pregnant wife to the forest keeping her in dilemma. The action taken by her husband surprises her a lot.

This proves that Sita suffers at the hand of Rama. Rama fails to perform his duty towards her pregnant wife when she needs a great care. She has been discarded cruelly by her husband. Indeed Rama sacrifices Sita to maintain his image of a perfect ruler.

### **Conclusion**

Thus Shashi Deshpande carves her craft with the help of few couples of short stories. Her reinterpretation of mythical characters through these stories has mesmerized a number of readers. Since, India has been a land of myths and legends; she has harvested the crops of it in her short stories. Her stories cover a vast range of topics and are mainly concerned with understanding emotion. She deals with real situations and sometimes goes to the epics in search of truths. In the process of doing so, she has retold the old tales. In the story 'The Stone Women' she has attempted to explore the myths and the stereotypes. In 'The Last Enemy', she looks into the heart of Duryodhana, the most hated mythical character among Indian masses. She has given him a chance to articulate his own inner turmoil. In 'The Inner Rooms', she has given voice to Amba and in 'Hear me Sanjay' to Kunti. In order to present the inner turmoil of her characters she has tried to look for a new possibility. She has made reflective mode of expression. Sita, Kunti, Draupadi, Amba and Duryodhana retrospect on their inner self. Through this method of Shashi Deshpande the readers get the ability to frame their own sympathy for these characters. In these mythological stories the writer has given space to introspect their inner recesses of their mind. She has played the part of a preserver. Really in her stories many of unvoiced, unsaid, unexpected aspects submerged the inner layers of human ethics.

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