Revisionist Myth Making as a Means of Countering Patriarchy in *That Long Silence*

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Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband’s travails... No, what have I to do with these mythical women? I can’t fool myself. *(That Long Silence 11)*

In a fictional career spanning two decades and a half, Shashi Deshpande has consistently sought to discuss the major issue whether the female archetypes of old or the myths of femininity constructed by the society to establish and maintain patriarchy are still valid. Her novel *That Long Silence* raises serious issues like, should Sita and Savitri continue to be the beacon lights for Indian women? If not, what precisely should be the role of a woman within her family and in the world beyond?

The notion of myth has undergone a radical transformation within the last century. In the texts of modern Indian writers like Shashi Deshpande, myth reaches ironic levels and is presented in ironic reversals, in so far, as they choose to subvert it. Myth works into a text as a symbolic mode of expression where the move is towards the selective recreation of reality. This requires a redefinition of the mythical roles such as Draupadi or Sita with a deviance on unconventional lines as Deshpande does in her works. When a writer explores a myth in such a way as to converge the textual meanings with the meanings acceptable to the culture, the use of myth is just ordinary and not revisionist. The use of myth becomes revisionist when the myth is appropriated for altered ends so that the textual meanings are at variance with the meanings accepted by the community. In her book *Stealing the Language*, Alicia Ostriker defines revisionist myth making as the process of using an ancient figure or tale by appropriating it for altered ends, the vessel filled with new wine, thus initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. Deshpande’s use of the myths of femininity in *That Long Silence* is revisionary in this sense. Deshpande uses this technique as a means for female self-projection and self-exploration. This deconstruction of myths by female knowledge of the female experience, by Deshpande, is a method of redefining the myths which have long been the source of collective male fantasy. Deshpande thus historicizes and desentimentalises the myths in her works and thus demolishes the fairytale conventions of femininity and feminine virtues. This paper is an attempt to explore and analyse the revisionary and subversive use of the myths of femininity by Deshpande in her novel *That Long Silence*.

The socialization of a girl child for her future roles as wife and mother begins in early childhood when the prevailing social mores and norms are studiously inculcated into her through myths, legends, folklore and rituals. The myths of femininity constructed by patriarchy to dominate and rule over women are conceived as natural and hence inevitable. Deshpande’s purpose in using these myths of femininity in her novels like *The Dark Hold No Terror*, *That Long Silence* and *The Binding Vine* is to reveal the patriarchal agenda of establishing a male dominated society by making female subjectivity inferior, hidden behind the cultural constructions of such myths.
Women are made to believe these mythical constructions of womanhood as natural so as to make them yield to their inferior status in society.

According to Jasodhara Bagchi, Indian womanhood is constituted by a multilayered accretion of myths, which in their turn essentialize and thereby homogenize the myth of ‘Bharatiyanari’ within the hegemonic ideology of patriarchy and thus serve patriarchy in both its local and global manifestations. As per these myths a woman is the pure vessel of virginity, chaste wife, weak and owned by her husband or the self-denying mother, never an independent entity (Bagchi 1-4). Deshpande reverses this Pativrata myth by presenting her protagonists as vulnerable to a certain extent. Neither Jaya in That Long Silence, nor Urmi in The Binding Vine are presented as Pativratas.

Certain other fictions of womanhood prevalent in India are concerned with woman’s sexuality and motherhood. Thus the ideal of womanhood is that of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness, which cannot be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband’s rejections (Wadley 28). In India motherhood is usually glorified. But the mental anguish and trauma that a woman undergoes during this phase of her life are often neglected by patriarchy who constructs the images of ideal motherhood. Her protagonist Jaya, through a process of introspection, realises the patriarchal agenda behind the construction of these myths of femininity and she comes out of the illusion that all these myths are natural and try to assert themselves. Deshpande achieves this end by presenting these myths as well as their ironic reversals simultaneously.

The concept of gender is not merely a biological phenomenon, but it is a social construction. Jaya, the heroine of the Sahithya Academy award winning novel That Long Silence, is not born a woman but rather tries to become a woman. She says that she even “Snipped off bits of herself to keep herself an ideal daughter, ideal wife, ideal mother, in short an ideal Indian female (7). This process of becoming a woman is shown through the character of Jaya. When she was born her father named her ‘Jaya’, which means victory. But after the marriage she is renamed as ‘Suhasini’, which means “a soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman.” (15-16). The former stands for a feminist figure and the latter symbolises a desexualised, ‘angel in the house’ stereotype. She has been taught that ‘a husband is like a sheltering tree.’ (32). She comes to learn that in the male dominated society a woman has no independent identity. She is the daughter, the wife and the mother of somebody. She has now two options: One is to live a traditional life of an ideal woman and another is to opt for the life of a modern, independent and equal partner in society. The new role – lures her but the deep-rooted tradition in her does not allow her to give up the old guise completely. This feminist dilemma is the crux of That Long Silence.

The theme of That Long Silence is, as always with Shashi Deshpande, the protagonist’s journey towards constructing an alternate identity. The heroine Jaya encounters a crisis, which is the usual strategy, employed by Shashi Deshpande to delineate the psyche of her protagonists. The novel opens with Jaya and her husband Mohan moving back into their old Dadar flat in Bombay from their cosy and palatial house. This journey is parallel to that of Sita following Rama to forest and to Savitri’s journey to hell to bring back her husband. In the small old Dadar Flat, shorn off the usual domestic routine and confronted by the ghosts of her past, Jaya becomes introvert and goes into deep contemplation of her past. This process of introspection ends with Jaya deciding to break her long silence through writing her autobiography.

Minor characters weave through the story. There are two ajjis and the mother, the uncles and the two brothers, mad Kusum, and most of all, Kamat, the only character in the novel who is not touched by Jaya’s hatred and the only person who can see
The novel traces the protagonists passage through a plethora of self-doubts, fear, guilt, smothered anger and deliberate silence towards articulation and affirmation and attempts to come to terms with her protean roles while trying to rediscover her identity. Jaya’s journey is from a fragmented, self to a unified whole. The fragmented self is associated with “women – are – the victims” theory. Deshpande demythifies this theory and as the glimmer of self – recognition dawn on her, she realises that she cannot make others, especially her husband the scapegoat for her failures. The novel ends with her determination to speak, to break her long silence. In one of her interviews with S. Prasanna Sree, Shashi Deshpande says:

I don’t write from myths. I write from real life… I don’t see women as Sita, Savitri and Draupadi. These are all myths. Let us leave them there. (Prasad 94)

The novel is structured in the pattern of Satyavan-Savitri myth, but in a post modern context. The novel has a cyclic structure, a typical feature of myths. The difference in Deshpande’s use of myth is the re-ordering of the meaning of these archetypes by historicising them and interrogating them. Jaya’s journey back to Dadar flat is symbolic of Savitri’s journey to hell to bring back her husband. Like Savitri who follows her husband to hell, Jaya follows Mohan into hiding when he was facing a crisis. It also resembles Sita following Rama to the forest. But the difference as far as Jaya in concerned is that, her journey leads her to a certain kind of reassessment of herself as a woman, wife, mother and daughter. Unlike the mythical embodiments of the ideal wife, Sita or Savitri’s journey Jaya’s journey is from an illusion, a myth, that of the husband as a protector, a ‘sheltering tree”, to the realisation that it need not always be so. Thus Deshpande is challenging the popular myth that marriage provides protection for women.

The ideal of womanhood fore grounded in the images of Sita or Savitri is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which cannot be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband’s absence, rejections, slights or thoughtlessness (Kakar 55). Jaya too like any other ideal wife believed that “a husband is like a sheltering tree” and tried to keep it alive and flourishing, watering it even with deceit and lies (31). But she was not able to keep her illusion of having a sheltering tree, a protecting hand in her husband for too long. That myth was destined to be shattered. The sheltering tree of her life “died of too much water, of white ants in the manure that destroyed its roots” (32). The myth of ‘Pativrata’ is an important concept related to the myth of ideal wifehood. Shashi Deshpande reverts this myth. Jaya is not presented as a Pativrata. Though, she tries to accommodate herself into being an ideal wife, she knows that the relation between Jaya and Mohan is like that of a pair of bullocks yoked together” and she followed him only because “to go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?” (12)

Deshpande interrogates the usual mythical image of women as weak and in need of male protection in That Long Silence. “The one who finds the coin first, rules the other at home.” commented one of Mohan’s relatives during their post wedding game (6). Jaya describes Mohan at this game: “my fingers scarcely moving, while his had scrabbled frantically through the grains, groping for the coin”(7). But it was Jaya who found the coin first, though as she says it “means nothing” (7). In Indian society it was always the husband who ruled the house and dominated over others. But this myth of a dominating husband gets toppled when later in the novel Jaya more or less unknowingly asserts her role, her place in the family when she opens the door ignoring Mohan’s extended hand for the keys. Later on she tries to explain this incident. She
says “It was not he who has relinquished his authority, it was I who no longer conceded any authority to him”(9) and this act, says Jaya, “was part of the same subtle resistance I had offered, the guerrilla warfare I had waged for many years”(9)

Deshpande has created a montage of marriage in That Long Silence through which she subverts the romantic ideal of marriage. There is Nayana, Mukta’s silent mother, the realist Jeeja and Mohan’s sister Vimala. All these women come and go, composing a picture of marriage, its angles, its varieties, point – counter – point to the main narrative of Jaya, whose marriage is failing, so that finally the readers feels as suffocated by marriage as does the protagonist. The pseudonym ‘Sita’ selected by Jaya for writing light, humorous pieces in the newspaper is symbolic of her attempts to mould herself like Sita, the mythical image of an ideal wife with “no questions, no retorts; only silence”. By trying to mould herself after these characters she was fooling herself. She even presents her attempts ironically when she says:

If Gandhari who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I did not want to know anything. (61-62)

Unlike the mythical character Maitreyee who was so sure of what she needed in her life and could therefore reject her philosopher husband’s offer of half his property Jaya says, “for even if he had asked me – What do you want? – I would have found it hard to give him a reply”. ---To know what you want--- I have been denied that” (25).

In one of her interviews, answering the criticism that the women writers resent traditional models of Sita and Savitri but fail to suggest any replacement, Deshpande says:

It is not my idea of replacing one model with another. I am just de-constructing these myths. Now you take the myth of Sita, as a perfect woman. When I see Sita, I ask myself, when your husband ditches you, abandons you when you are pregnant, how do you feel? I am going to be angry and upset… You know this is what I mean by saying deconstruction. ...... All these myths were created by men, and not by women. So we are in the process of discovery now and we are not just going to move aside some models and bring in new models. We are in the process of discovering ourselves. (Prasad 100)

In That Long Silence Deshpande questions some of the fictions of womanhood relating to her sexuality through the portrayal of the married life of Jaya and Mohan. As per Indian beliefs, a woman is Prakriti, Nature, the uncultured and undifferentiated matter and hence dangerous. Therefore men, the Pursua, the cosmic person, the cultured and differentiated spirit, must control it. In That Long Silence, Deshpande shows how the husband Mohan satisfies his own desires and after that ignores his wife Jaya with her body still war. Jaya’s sexual life gives her no satisfaction. For her, it was like drinking water without feeling thirsty and it becomes extraneous. Another myth of femininity prevailing in Indian society, which Deshpande subverts in her writing, is that of motherhood. It is motherliness, says sudhir Kakar in his “Feminine Identity in India”, which establishes the adult identity of a woman. Her rejection of the idealisation of motherhood is evident in That Long Silence when she makes her protagonist, Jaya, abort her third child, even without the knowledge or permission of her husband. She regrets her action later, but it is not because the ‘mother’ in her feels guilty but because she feels that the child whom she got rid off “Would have been a girl – with all the qualities I missed in Rahul and Rati”. In the novel Jaya is portrayed as a failed mother. For her daughter Rati, her mother is “impossible” and according to Rahul, her son, Jaya doesn’t understand anything (131).
In That Long Silence Deshpande presents her characters performing Vratas and Pujas in accordance with the traditional concepts, but simultaneously shows the ironic reversals of these practices by showing the fertility of such practices. There is Vimala, Mohan’s sister, performing the Mangala Gouri Puja, performed by the married Hindu women for the first years of their marriage for a successful married life. Unfortunately she has no children ever after performing the fifth puja. Vanita mami performs the Tulsi-Puja regularly to free a wife from the fear of widowhood and in That Long Silence Vanitamani is saved from being a widow for she dies before her husband’s death, a “fortunate” death with Kumkum on her forehead, but paradoxically suffering as a wife silently until then. Then there is Mukta going on with her fasts to avoid widowhood even after becoming a widow.

Deshpande does not use myth and legends in her novels as embellishment or for local colour or ethnic appliqué work. Myths, legends and folklore are deeply engrained in the Indian Psyche, they are a part of our collective unconscious and through the subverted use of these myths, Deshpande tries to reconstruct, deconstruct and reorder the female identity in her works. This revisionary use of myths also adds an element of intertexuality to these novels through the transposition of the implications of womanhood involved in these myths into that of contemporary reality of womanhood, refreshing and revising the connotations of both. The novels That Long Silence and The Binding Vine are thus projects that reveal the gap between he myths of femininity and modern educated and emancipated women through a revised mythical framework. In That long Silence Jaya had reconstructed her identity and along with that her capacity to dream. She decided to get rid of the silence, which women have lived with for ages to stop speaking Prakrit to live as per the dictum “Ya thecchasi tathu karu” (192)Deshpande’s attempt in her novels That Long Silence and The Binding Vine, as well as in many other novels is to construct such an oppositional discourse by subjecting the age old and man-made myths of womanhood to scrutiny.

Works Cited: