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Beyond the 'No Exit': Reconfiguring the Trajectory of (Hegemonic) Gendered Spaces and Strategies of Resistance in Shashi Deshpande's *In the Country of Deceit*

Niharika Sharma
Research Scholar
Department of English
Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar (Punjab)

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Abstract:

The novel *In the Country of Deceit* delineates the stance of reinterpreting the imbalanced gender inscriptions by presenting counter-hegemonic position(s) against the dominant socio-cultural order. Seen thus, Deshpande's portrayal of Devayani—the protagonist—has created ripples in the Indian English Novel as she is a middle-class family product but is open to challenge the hegemonic order by way of transgressing the accepted codes of socio-cultural signification. This connotes her intent to go beyond definitions/gendered inscriptions and the same is fuelled by her earnestness to make a counter response to the hegemonic masculinity. Under such context, she also explores her sexuality—a domain denied to the second sex. However, her assertion is subtle and manifests a lot of complexity. It is in this larger context that such assertion is worth analyzing so as to lay bare the finer nuances of being a woman as a gendered subjectivity. Accordingly, the paper shall make a humble attempt to interpret Devayani's crusade through the hegemonic structures/inscriptions before she achieves a psycho-social-existential negotiation.

Keywords: Gender, inscriptions, hegemony, counter-hegemony, transgression.

In the novel *In the Country of Deceit*, Devayani is the main protagonist of the narrative. Having chosen the stance of questioning the imbalanced gendered inscriptions by exercising a counter-hegemonic position against the dominant socio-cultural order, she faces crisis in almost all of her relationships. Seen thus, Deshpande's portrayal of Devayani has created ripples in the Indian English Novel scenario as she is a middle-class family product but is open to transgressing the normative signification of socio-cultural order. This connotes her intent to go beyond definitions/gendered inscriptions which is fuelled by her earnestness to make a counter response to the hegemonic masculinity. In this sense, she is also allowed to explore/decode her sexuality—a domain denied to the second sex. However, her assertion is subtle and manifests a lot of complexity. In this larger context, such assertion is worth analyzing so as to lay bare the finer nuances of being a woman as a *gendered subjectivity*. Accordingly, the critique attempts to interpret Devayani's crusade through the hegemonic structures/inscriptions before she achieves a psycho-social-existential negotiation.

Delving deeper, Devayani is a liberated woman and refracts her agency in multivalent proportions throughout the narrative. However at the outset of the novel, she represents an inscribed being. Accordingly, she may be perceived being a passive and submissive character. Apparently, she has the habit of compromising in everything and adjusting in every possible way by modeling her lifestyle as per the wishes of others and thus fits into their shoes *unquestioningly*. She appears to be unaware of her real worth and thus she continues playing a quarry to everyone. Women are entwined in this *make-belief world* where "...the cult of obedience is so consistently thrust upon women and thus excluding them from any face to face confrontation with real life"(Jain and Singh43). Values, mannerisms, pressures and societal training impose indifference or a blind silence to her feelings. So, all the time and in all situations, Devayani allows herself to (inertly) accept the prescriptions. Such apparent conduct of Devayani makes an explicit reference to her tacit internalization of the hegemonic order and the requirements attached to it which she prefers to take on in the subsequent phases of the narrative. In this way, her journey signifies the clandestine contest-oriented dynamics of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic power structures which subsequently unsettle the apparent power paradigm(s) in the novel.

The narrative has been divided into four sections. The first part named "Ground Zero" talks of destruction and demolition in the very beginning. Speaking symbolically, the demolitions signify the demolition of a value system. Cross-connecting such demolition with Devayani, she opens up her being to be re-inscribed and thus prefers the code of transgression in order to unsettle the '*normative givens*' governing her existence. Subsequently, a process of change starts which gradually breaks the age-old programmed thinking of the protagonist. It was Savi- Devayani's sister—who has designed the new house and dismantled the ancestral home. For Devayani, it comes as a surprise since it manifests a complete reversal of the old order. She realizes:

Savi had deliberately worked towards something that was a complete reversal of the old house, a denial of everything our old home had been. The large rooms, the light and air that came in from the huge windows, the broad sills on which we could sit, the sense of openness—all these were a total contrast to the dingy, dark small rooms we had lived in. The most startling change was in our bedrooms, Savi's and mine. Large, spacious and opening out on to the back where a walled garden was to be, they were Savi's belated defiant statement against the tiny dark room the two of us had shared as children (Deshpande 4).

Symbolically, this change indicates a fresh beginning which brings color to the life of the protagonist and she feels "...this was not an end, but a beginning. A fresh start. A clean slate" (Deshpande 3). Hence, the new house signifies the Ground Zero for Devayani.

Devayani's potential resistance gains impetus when she confronts Ashok Chinappa. Through her relationship with Ashok, we are able to decode how Devayani gradually matures and evolves from Devayani to Devi and finally to Divya—a name given by Ashok to her. When the narrative begins, Devayani is in her 30's and lives alone in a small town of Rajnūr after the death of her parents. The narrative delineates her state in the following way:

All these years I had been the accompanist to other people's lives. First I had been a follower of my spirited, old sister, then in charge of my parents' lives, the observer of their tragedy. For a while I had acted as my cousin Kshama's helper and later I had been Sindhu's attendant after her surgery. Now, for the first time, I had to play solo. I had no one else to look after, no one to think about. I felt as if I was waiting for the curtain to go up, waiting for something to happen (Deshpande 8).

And that 'something' is the entry of a man (Ashok) in her life who causes a fundamental change her being. However, it is important to emphasize that her solo performance proves to be disastrous in the eyes of other people for whom she did so much all these years and her decisions are criticized by the representatives of the hegemonic order.

In order to assert her emphasized femininity and the hard-won independence, she chooses to violate/transgress the institution of marriage and thus she is not interested in getting married. It is in this perspective that Devayani willfully rejects the varied marriage proposals but prefers an 'illicit' relationship with a married man who is much older than her, and is a father of a ten year old daughter. Importantly, it is not a decision which is made in a hurry or in a fit of emotion. She ruminates seriously over the pros and cons associated with her relationship and she finally accepts Ashok as he is. It is also true that she gets attracted towards his enigmatic personality. Surely, there is a fond regard, adherence and telepathy between them which define their relationship. Ashok calls her up again and says "I rang up, but I only wanted to hear your voice. I made you speak in the morning just to hear you" (Deshpande 76). Like a stalking lover he tries to enamor her. Devayani is equally attracted towards him. She thinks about him and says "I could not sleep. I kept hearing his voice as if I'd taped the conversation and was replaying the tape in my mind. The exact words in the same order over and over again" (Deshpande 77).

Apart of being apprehensive of what is going on in her life, she is struggling hard with the social stigmas by probing her own mind and heart time and again. It is worth considering here that the hegemonic processes create identities and the psycho-social conditioning prohibits one's mind to work in the intuitive direction. This perhaps confuses and scares her. A dynamic contest goes on in her mind and she ruminates: "And why did he keep ringing me up? Was he flirting with me? I used to watch boys and girls indulge in it, amazed at the light-hearted banter, at the way they enjoyed the inane talk" (Deshpande 78).

However, the next meeting with Ashok proves to be a turning point in their relationship. While dropping her back from Rani's house, Ashok proposes Devayani. Ashok's contention startles her being as she feels enchanted by his words. He says: "I'm a married man. I have a daughter, she's nine, no, she'll be ten this year...I can promise you nothing. Nothing" (Deshpande 91). He is perhaps physically attracted towards her and like a teenage lover; he showers delightful words to charm her. Infatuated by his words, Devayani feels touched despite the fact she is sensitive to the hegemonic eyes around that make her conscious of the fact that whatever is happening is unnatural. Therefore, she temporarily holds her emotions. However, she is prepared and somewhat ready to enter into the country of deceit by this time and she ruminates: "Now I cannot tell Savi about this new nightmare. I cannot tell that this time I am frightened, not of the man, but of myself, of my desire to *run*, not away from him, but into his arms" (Deshpande 94). She acknowledges her fears and

accepts her desires. For this, she opts to fight with the world around and her own deep rooted socialization. Hence, this stance signifies her counter-hegemonic resistance/subversion towards the socio-cultural gendered inscriptions which permeate a woman's being.

At last comes the time of her final acceptance of her relationship with him. An anonymous letter by Ashok perplexes her and makes her conscious. She trembles and exclaims: "For a moment I was confused, it was like blacking out...my hands were shaking...I had a strange sensation of coldness on my face and putting my hand to my cheek found to my surprise that it was wet. I tried to wipe my tears, but they kept flowing. I gave up finally and let them flow unhindered" (Deshpande 127).Swinging between her desires and duties, she suddenly puts a stop to her thoughts. Through such psychodrama of Devayani, the novelist extrapolates the different ideological elements that shape her identity, the institutionalized dogmas that restrict her sexuality. Now, Devayani courageously takes the decision. She does not brood for long and soon jumps into action although this may result in her social censure. She goes to meet her lover and finally accepts her own decision/inner voice. This is the beginning of her journey of love towards fulfillment. She stops conforming her femininity and so starts enjoying being an unburdened woman. By decolonizing the hegemonic order and thus appropriating her marginality, Devayani puts an end to her socialized self. Resultantly, she experiences a multi-dimensional gratification vis-à-vis her relationship with Ashok. The sense of freedom and self-assertion—which was imprisoned somewhere deep inside her—manifests a release on her part. In this sense, she blooms and comes out to be a 'new woman'. She realizes that there is no point in deceiving herself. She speaks the truth to herself and admits that she wants to be with Ashok. The socio-cultural inscriptions do entrap her, confuse her, frighten her but ultimately the inner counter-hegemonic desire convinces her to assert her core being.

Not only this, Ashok's confirmation of promising her nothing and admitting that he is a married man with a daughter does not move her a bit. She contemplates: "What difference does it make to me that he has a wife and a daughter?" (Deshpande 94). Quite aware of the fact that her relationship with her lover would never be accepted and appreciated by her family; she favors to continue with it and accepts the situation bravely. A trail of norms and acculturations warns her to be open eyed and audible to the potential storm in her life but she chooses the difficult path. In a sense, she prefers the strategies of resistance in order to gratify herself of the long thirst of her being. This thirst along with her uncompromising desire leads her to physical gratification which she welcomes whole heartedly. The societal inhibitions try to curb her desires time and again, hold her back, checks her steps but all these tangles prove futile.

Significantly, the way Devayani inches towards Ashok is also symbolic of her moving out of the patriarchal space by adopting resistance to carve out her counter-hegemonic stance which brings a paradigm shift in her life. Interestingly, her movement contains fluidity and assertion whereby the over-arching hegemonic structures are ripped apart so as to endow her new vision towards life and its socio-cultural artifacts. In other words, the process of her rejuvenation is marked with re-inscribing her gendered being in order to see the clear light of the day. Her choicest relationship with Ashok is so intense that the social barriers become

invisible to Devayani. She boldly explores her sexuality and maintains her stand with courage. She has the guts to accept the shortcomings of the relationship which shows her uncompromising wish to have her share of joy and ecstasy. Now, she is sure of herself. She is certain that: “I want a needlepoint of extreme happiness; I want a moment in my life which will make me feel I am touching the sky” (Deshpande 24). When she comes to know about Ashok’s decision of taking up the promotion, she takes the things courageously and respects his decisions. She knows that there can be no future ahead.

Through the character of Devayani, the novelist presents a woman’s journey to a new realm of realization where she not only accepts what she originally feels but also exhibits a strong sense of revelation of the shams of society. A woman is forced to identify with the fraudulent and phoney traditions to save and sustain her existence. In this sense, Devayani is very powerful and suggestively opens new vistas for the contemporary women. After realizing and relishing the relationship, she declares her love to the family too. It is an imaginary and illusionary union in the eyes of the family; a dirty quagmire. But she herself feels eternal happiness in the presence of Ashok. Before the family could know of her relations with Ashok, her happiness is visible to most of the characters in the novel. Sindhu exclaims, “You sound happy” (Deshpande 147). Yet again: “Naseem says it differently. ‘You look as if you’ve been Brassoed,’ she said. ‘As if someone has brought out the shine and polish in you’” (Deshpande 148).

Speaking retrospectively, Devayani’s life had always been restrictive and limited. Her reins were in the hands of her parents first and then in the hands of her sister Savi. Under such context, this (love)affair acts as a catharsis. It elevates Devayani and thus liberates her of the societal obligations. So far she has been defining herself differently with respect to the other people. The acceptance of Ashok’s proposal is the first decision she makes on her own. This may be the reason that she never regrets it. It would be ironical to mention here that in her relationship with Ashok too, Devayani never asks for anything. But there is a strong sense of fulfillment here. She has the strength of holding the connectedness and calling it off when it does not meet the desired requirements. She shows her fortitude and determination to harbor the relatedness, project it to the family and also to bear the brunt and criticism of other people around her. She comes out to be a powerful woman who was earlier firmly confined under the hegemonic limitations. She fights with her guilt too. She exclaims: “You get used to everything—you learn how to live with suffering, pain, death. Why not with guilt then? Yes, I would learn to cope with guilt as well” (Deshpande 152). Hence, she dares to break the circumscribed life which a woman is expected to lead. Studied thus, it is apt to mention Atrey and Vinay Kirpal’s observation:

Deshpande’s art lies in selecting situations with which most Indian women can identify. Her focus is on the woman within the marital, domestic relationship. She seeks to expose the ideology by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in society. Her novels eclectically employ postmodern technique of deconstructing patriarchal culture and customs, and revealing these to be man-made constructs. (15)

Devayani realizes that by being unresponsive to her own feelings, she has cheated herself from her inner voice, longing and urges. Every other relation in her life believes that s/he

knows what suits Devayani. But by asserting her will and taking charge of her actions, she confirms that she belongs to herself and then to the world of others. Importantly, Devayani despite having played the role of a good daughter and a good sister to perfection; finds herself alone and estranged. She realizes that she has been unfair to herself. There is something more she desires for. Hence, she does not discourage herself from acknowledging her friendship with a married man. Devayani is different in the sense that she dares to question the established identity of a woman and provides a new face to herself and to the society she is part of. Usha Bande observes something similar when she comments:

Shashi Deshpande lets her women experience the confusing and disturbing silence within, get a glimpse of their inner being and empower themselves to confront the power politics, comprehend the situation and get control on their lives. In that their intention to assert and defy is evident. That is how the novel resisting patriarchy is born. (47)

Devayani is drawn towards Ashok as he treats her as his equal, gives her time and the required space. He never imposes anything on her and waits patiently for her responses and decisions. She is impressed by his truthfulness and straightforwardness towards her. She develops an ease while being in his company. There prevails a maze of doubts, uncertainty and fear but this relationship solves the incertitude. Both Ashok and Devayani are negating the age old conventional schemas of the society and project the new breakthroughs in their own respective gestures towards each other. There is no denying the fact that they bond well and are affectionate towards one another but they leave no strings attached when they unanimously decide to part their ways. They take no time to move ahead. Ashok handles the whole situation in a well-planned manner and takes no strain of this relationship within him. As soon as he gets promotion, he goes away. Devayani—in her unique way—copes with her emotional ties, fights her desires and comes out to be victorious. She feels as if she has won over herself by defying the world she inhabits. She contemplates about her own deeds and connects them with the socio-cultural chains which stuck forcefully to everyone's personality. She feels: "And then I thought of what I had done, I thought, why had I done this? I knew it was wrong; nothing could make it not wrong. And yet, I had rushed into it. Why had I done it? I knew the answer. I did it because I wanted him, I wanted to be with him, I wanted to be in his company, I wanted to sleep with him, I wanted this relationship..." (Deshpande 142). She uses words like 'the other woman', 'the kept woman', 'a mistress' for her own self but after a while brushes all these abuses and accepts her decision. In this way, she starts living in 'good faith'. In a way, she has already re-inscribed her being and thus moves "...beyond patriarchy" (Tyson 92) through her counter-hegemonic stance.

Hence, it is a story of a woman who desires to realize herself and regenerate her being with an intention to reconfigure the hegemonic order. Her resoluteness against the rife ideologies paves the way for her determination. An attitude of non-compliance to the systems of power fuels her consciousness and thus she is determined to get fulfillment of her core being. Interestingly, Devayani doesn't speak her heart out to anyone except a few contemplative thoughts. Speech and silence convey and confirm the subtle polyphony of the text. In addition to this, the speech-silence relationship, in a way, equals the conflictual poetics of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggle of the narrative. Her strength is

silence; her stoic silence which is impregnated with intellect. Thus, the turbulence of her mind and the pain of her heart are never laid bare. Having arrived at a self-determined identity of her own, she faces everything with an open heart and takes responsibility with a firm determination. Her counter-hegemonic aspirations culminate in Ashok's arms which also help her to assert a new being. Seen thus, their camaraderie may also be conceptualized as a transgression of the socio-cultural hegemonic order. Devayani transgresses from a docile woman to a demanding and asserting woman. No more a timid person, she shakes the hegemonic inhibitions and redeems herself. Substantiated thus, it is not simply a repetitive story of a woman suffering because of her unfavorable life but a sensitive concern of a woman's self-making—her “becoming”. Simone de Beauvoir quotes in her influential treatise *The Second Sex*:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine. (281)

Devayani accounts for what she becomes and thus evolves from her *becoming* a new being. In this journey she transgresses the prescriptive gender roles and thus reforms herself by asserting a new being. In this sense, she may be valorized for standing against the patriarchy by way of asserting her individuality. She defies the normative and prescriptive socio-cultural order which creates the imbalanced living spaces for its inhabitants. Such spaces are gendered and thus marginalize women from times immemorial. She resists against this hegemonic order by opting a counter-hegemonic stance against it.

Observed thus, the resistance and the disapproval to sustain the hegemonic specificities of gender and sexuality by Devayani is undoubtedly laudable. The point in focus refers to the acceptance of Devayani of her core self/the recognition of her own ‘being’. Usha Bande observes:

...the women of the new generation live for purely personal gratifications, May be sexual or psychological. Critics see this withdrawal variously as quest for autonomy, individuation or a deviant behavior. Feminists read it as women's need for a new space that Mary Daly defines as ‘new cosmosis’. (210)

Devayani challenges the hegemonic consensual belief whereby the life of a female is set to stay on the ‘threshold’. However, she asserts to be free to think/act. Thus, she counter attacks the hegemonic pressures and successfully “...erodes the male belief that a woman has no need to seek salvation or fulfillment because her world is contained within the threshold” (Bande 210). Hence, Deshpande presents Devayani to be a different kind of female who moves beyond her ordained gender role and asserts through counter-hegemonic *performance*. Rice and Waugh quotes Judith Butler from her seminal treatise *Bodies That Matter*:

...gender is always in fact a performance, not what one is but what one does...the performance of gender is never singular but always citational and reiterative. There is always scope for pastiche, *reformation*, play and *resistance*. (228)

Hence, the heroine of this novel refuses to perform her given gender role and she breaks the cords tied to the female identity. Perspectivized thus, she expressively enters in the country of

deceit whereby she explores her own existential space. The analysis lays bare the covert polemics of resistance with which the novelist enables her female protagonist to subvert *or* confront the dominant structure(s) of power-relations. It is in this larger context that the present study deals with the ambivalent/resistive disputations of the female protagonist. The study also interprets the finer nuances of being a woman as a gendered subjectivity in order to decode complexity of the female experience with a consistent emphasis to delineate the hegemonic structures/inscriptions and counter-hegemonic polemical assertion for achieving psycho-social and existential authenticity.

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