

In The Country of Deceit: Shashidesh Pande's Anatomy of Social Fabric

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Abstract : *The present paper aims to depict the conflict between tradition and modernity, the various painful experiences that the women undergoes from innocence to maturity; the effect of social and political events on a woman's life, a man-made moral code and a male dominated society, the bonding and the power structure among women themselves; lack of educational and economic opportunities, women's hypersensitivity, her potential to overcome her tragic situation through conscious efforts force fully through her latest novel In The Country of Deceit taken for study.*

Key Words: *Tradition, modernity, innocence, maturity, social, political, educational economic.*

Deshpande, in her prolific writings accurately mirrors the microcosm of India with its tradition, culture and social conventions. Love, relationship, family, and home are some of the recurrent themes imbibed in the narratives of her novels. At the same time she catches feminine sensibility too as a perennial context. From *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) to *Moving On* (2004) she delineates the fluctuations of the female ego or self beneath the unavoidable pressures of social and emotional affinities. Her heroines Saru, Indu, Jaya, Urmi, Sumi, Madhu, born out of her pen during 1980 to 2004, in the form of characters are seen entrapped between tradition and modernity. And it is noteworthy that her heroines are so strong that they not only win over the tumults of life in due course of time but also testify their creator's vision of 'reformative feminism'.

The novel *In the Country of Deceit* (2008) too contains some of the signature themes of Shashi Deshpande's writing but differs from her other novels in terms of its bold subject matter and entirely novel treatment. The title of the novel is straight forward and is capable of drawing readers' attention. The use of the term 'deceit' in the title of the novel raises several questions in our mind such as who is deceived in this novel. Who has deceived? Is it about some place where deception takes place? Or is it simply a state of mind?

The narrative of the novel has been divided into four segments entitled "Ground Zero", "Epiphany", "In the Country of Deceit" and "Unspooning" where the first two segments appear to be a kind of preparation for the third segment whereas the fourth one supplements the whole narrative with a meticulous summing up. The title of each segment metaphorically informs about the content. The story begins with a detailed description of the background where the heroine Devayani is shown recovering from the demolition of her ancestral home by building a modern house. As Devayani puts in the beginning:

'Ground Zero'. It was I who said the words. And, in spite of the death knell sound of the words, in spite of their association with destruction... For us, this was not an end, but a beginning. A fresh start. A clear state (*In The Country of Deceit*, 1).

The next segment "Epiphany" enkindles delicate feelings in the heart of Devayani who experiences the epiphanic ecstasy of love and sex with her lover Ashok. The third segment is of immense significance in the novel because it offers a close view to the dilemma and mental processes of the protagonist who wins at last over the circumstances with a spiritual realization in the fourth segment.

Devayani is introduced to Ashok by a middle aged actress Rani in a small gathering. Unexpectedly, after few days Ashok proposes Devayani by promising her nothing in life. His call for love stimulates the lady in such a way that she breaks all social barriers and steps into what Shashi Deshpande calls 'the country of deceit'. The 'country of deceit' could be interpreted in various ways. Apparently it seems to be the world of love or desires. At the same time it also refers to a state of mind when an individual is conscious of some guilt. As the protagonist says: "I had entered the country of deceit. I could no longer be open and honest with people I loved; I had to deceive them" (ICD, 147). This shows that the heroine is conscious of her act of hiding the

reality and it is largely due to this reason that the author has given the title *In the Country of Deceit* to the novel. Highlighting the significance of the title Shashi Deshpande frankly in an online interview: "It seems odd, doesn't it? But, when you think of what love does to people and the things love makes them do ... My novel explores the slippery, treacherous terrain that love takes people into" (*ambianny.blogspot*).

Love undoubtedly happens to be perennial theme in Deshpande's novels but in the present novel she focuses more on the adult love between two highly mature couple. The author in an online interview explains: "All my books are about relationships, particularly this one which is about love between an adult man and an adult woman" (*dnaindia.com*). Therefore, Devayani's falls in love with Ashok is though unexpected but not sudden because she ruminates seriously over the pros and cons associated with her. When we carry out a compassionate examination of the narrative we find that the threads of love, loyalty and deception intimately intersect each other in the novel. Speaking thoughtfully about adult love the author states:

It is very difficult to judge if adult love is good or bad. Human beings always crave for love, even in death a dying man wants to hold someone's hands... My novel is about adult love... In my book, the first thing the man tries to tell the woman is that 'I promise you nothing. But I stand outside your gate and cannot get you out of my mind'. I think that's the real sign of love. (*dnaindia.com*).

Critics often compare Shashi Deshpande with Jane Austen for her art of characterization, magnitude of narrative and range of themes. Rumina Sethi writes in this connection: "Deshpande's novels are about the ordinary lives of women, too ordinary I might add. These are women who live a humdrum existence ... a world so common that I sometimes think it does not deserve to be written about" (*hindu.com*). There is an epic quality in her writing with prime focus on the consciousness of the characters rather than their appearances. In, *In the Country of Deceit*, Devayani undergoes a process of mental scrutiny regarding her terms with Ashok and the bourgeois world of moral and ethical values in which she has to justify herself.

Devayani, in this novel is a prism like character with many potential shades which emanate only when the spark of Ashok's love falls on her. She is many times deeper inside than what she appears on the surface. Her's is a highly thoughtful and self – conscious being which knows what it does. The events and incidents in her life apparently seem to be accidental or coincidental but the deeper observations inform that they are well deliberated actions. For instance, she doesn't accept to reject Ashok's proposal immediately, instead, she thinks over it for several days, evaluates every idea and then proceeds. She has an insightful, meditative and philosophical temperament which gives her an independent perception of life uncontrolled by social conventions. Devayani reflects in the following manner:

I had wanted to go to a place where no one would know me... I felt as if I had shed my past and become a new person altogether. I was not Devayani Mudhol, I was an anonymous Nobody. It felt good. I knew then why people walked out of their homes leaving everything behind. (*ICD, 15-16*)

These words reflect the heroine's mood in complete dejection. Truly, Devayani in the beginning of the novel is found least influenced by the flood of marriage proposals and sex suggestions coming from her friends and relatives. She is not even slightly moved by the advices such as "anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection"(28) or "collective experience has value, individual experience has none"(41) or "the generating organ is the centre of all pleasure"(43) but her friendship with the neighbour actress Rani opens that gate of "ananda" for her in which she enters never to return(43).

Deshpande probes deep into the psyche of her young heroines especially when they rebel against the traditional ways of life. the conflict in the psyche of Devayani germinates when her sister bewares her that the society would call her Ashok's "girl" or "mistress" or a "whore" or "flossy" for her relation with a man who is already married. In this novel through the character of Devi, the author has tried to present the position of unmarried girls amidst the social and individual reality. Devi thinks too much about herself, about Ashok, about love, sex and society. Her partial obsession with pre and post thought in a way also offers us an open access to the mental mechanics of Devayani: "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?"(142). Her too much thinking at times reminds us of Shakespeare's hero Hamlet. She, however, differs from Shakespearean hero in the sense that Hamlet fails to resolve his conflict whereas Devayani succeeds in doing so.

Her concept of love is so scared and divine that she goes to the extent of comparing it with "breath" or "pran" of "life". That is why the idea of leaving Ashok for Devi becomes difficult. Deshpande presents this idea by quoting "*pranah pranam dadati*" from *Upanishad* which means what is life without breath(201). The author

elaborates this concept by saying that true love cannot make anyone mean or selfish and if it does so it can't be a real love. It has been expressed through the following words of Devayani:

Savi and Shree are right. Something is wrong with our relationship; Ashok's and mine, if it makes me think this way, if it makes me mean and selfish. And I have to ask myself: if love is so wonderful, why should love make me do what is wrong?(202)

The novelist remarkably presents the dilemma of the protagonist Devayani who dwindle between her love affair with a married middle aged man and the social norms. Presenting a fine balance between traditionalism and progressiveness, the narrative offers a realistic portrayal of wistful pursuit of Devayani for love. The subject of adult love between Devi and Ashok has been boldly yet convincingly discussed in the novel from hedonistic point of view. As Deshpande announces about *In the Country of Deceit* during one of her talks: "This one is purely about love ... 'Come Up and Be Dead' is wholly realized here" (hindu.com).

The author successfully evokes the atmosphere of a small, non-descript town which is representative of roundabout any small town in any far flung corner of India. The sentiments attached to the ancestral property are truly passionate and quintessentially Indian. The dilemma of the protagonist is depicted adroitly and realistically. The element of deceit and betrayal in the parallel love story of the glamorous, enigmatic actress Rani adds a dimension when she asserts—

The large rooms, the light and air that comes in from 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 room we had lived in" (ICD 4).

The house reflects Devi's tastes, interests, outlook and values and thus becomes a highly expressive emblem of her attempts to build her identity at her own terms. Her act of demolishing the house built by her parents further indicates the effort of Devi to get rid of the stranglehold of her past and the memories of despair and nothingness in the life her parents. This new house is a symbol of her inner strength and resilience – the ingredients required for a fulfilling and happy life. This urge of Devi to live a life of freedom in harmony with her deepest impulses and inclinations is depicted by the novelist again through a very suggestive image of frog pond built at the back of her newly constructed house. She, like the frogs in water of her pond, seeks to live a life of freedom without bothering about the restrictive codes and prescriptions of the world around.

Deshpande's symbols also provide the reader an understanding into the recesses of the psyche of her characters. She reveals very suggestively the fears, urges and desires repressed into the depths of the unconscious by the super – ego or moral consciousness of her men and women. This is often discernable in the form of images which appear in the state of dreams. Though there are a number of instances of this kind, Devi's nightmare in, *In The Country of Deceit* is one of the most illuminating examples. A girl in her mid teens, she sees herself desperately trying to run away from a man who hotly pursues her in her dream. It is clearly revelatory of the growing demands of her sexuality as a young girl as well as her strong fear of this experience. One finds that Devi represses the needs of her body and refuses to marry upto the age of twenty six even in the face of been successful in giving a convincing justification to the title *In the Country of Deceit* but just like the title of the novel the ending too raises several questions pertaining to the issue of disputed land, the role of the actress Rani in the novel, the relevance of series of letters written by different characters to Devayani, and the need of introducing few such characters that seem flat and redundant.

In The Country of Deceit Deshpande's unflinching gaze tracks the suffering, evasions and lies that overtake those caught in the web of subterfuge. There are no hostages take in, *In The Country of Deceit*; no victors; only scarred lives. This understated yet compassionate examination of the nature of love, loyalty and deception establishes yet again Deshpande's position as one of India's most formidable writers of fiction.

The element of inner conflict appears to be one of the main secrets of attraction her characters hold for her readers. This also plays a significant role in making her portrayals complex and dynamic giving them a place of central importance in the scheme of her themes and structures. It goes a long way, in fact, in energizing and developing her plots sustaining throughout the suspense and interest of the reader. This tension between opposing pulls and pressures of emotions, thoughts, needs, aspirations etc. generates a gripping element of drama which gives depth, richness and width to the otherwise seemingly simple plots of Deshpande's novels. Thus the dialectics between the forces of cosmic, social, psychological and biological determinism on the one hand and individual's urge and struggle for freedom on the other tend to cohere and make her works of art look perfectly unified and organic wholes.

Thus we can safely conclude that Deshpande's novels deal with the conflict between tradition and modernity, the various painful experiences that the women undergoes from innocence to maturity; the effect of

social and political events on a woman's life, a man-made moral code and a male dominated society, the bonding and the power structure among women themselves; lack of educational and economic opportunities, women's hypersensitivity, her potential to overcome her tragic situation through conscious efforts. Deshpande depicts the empowerment of all the suppressed sections-suppressed because of caste, class, gender-and the emergence of modern, secular values such as egalitarianism.

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