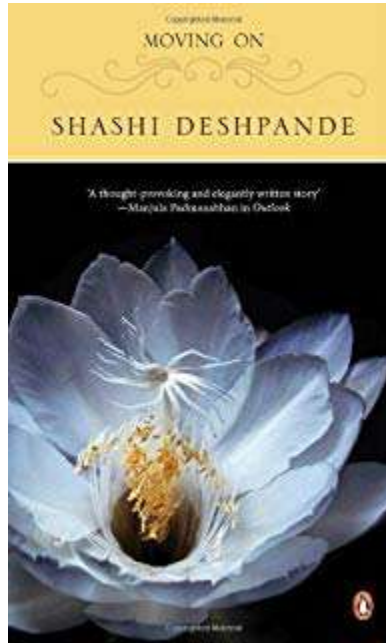


The Unpredictability of Woman Psyche in Shashi Deshpande's *In the Country of Deceit*

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.in/Country-Deceit-Shashi-Deshpande/dp/014306715X>

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's feminism appears to be a natural kind of feminism that it is not based on theory. She writes about the web of family relationships, particularly those in extended family set-ups. The kaleidoscopic variety of characters is amazing. Deshpande never seems to have lost her hold on her characters, male or female ones -- the author devotes much larger space for the delineation of her women characters. The variety is infinite, and each character has its uniqueness. Deshpande's unflinching gaze tracks the suffering, evasions and lies that overtake those caught in the web of subterfuge. There are no hostages taken 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 book revolves around the tumultuous twist given to the life of the protagonist, Devayani, as she breaks all set norms in the pursuit of happiness. There is something that prompts her pursuit for happiness, even if it is in the form of an 'illicit' relationship with a married IPS officer, Ashok Chinappa. This paper is a modest attempt to bring out the unpredictability of a woman's psyche with special reference to Devayani's character in the novel, *In the Country of Deceit*.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande, *In the Country of Deceit*, family, suffering, guilty, subterfuge, narcissistic.

Shashi Deshpande

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most prominent Indian women novelists writing in English. Although she was initially reluctant to be labeled as a feminist, towards her mid-career as a novelist she realizes that she is a fervent feminist but with a difference. Her novels may be described as a kind of education for women to enlighten themselves and be independent economically. Her protagonists are middle-class educated career women; in a sense, she champions the cause of women's upliftment. Shashi Deshpande's feminism appears to be a natural kind of feminism that it is not based on theory. She writes about the web of family relationships, particularly those in extended family set-ups. The kaleidoscopic variety of characters is amazing. Deshpande never seems to have lost her hold on her characters, male or female ones -- the author devotes much larger space for the delineation of her women characters. The variety is infinite, and each character has its uniqueness. Deshpande's heroines find a voice of their own and their initial will to move on is counteracted upon by their passivity to patriarchal construction of space for women. In embracing this space, they adhere to the feminine aesthetics. Malashri Lal opines that,

This space is operative for the woman who has made the irretrievable choice in her one directional journey. She has accepted the challenge of gender determined environment designed for the promotion and prosperity of men and must contend with prejudices against her attempts to appropriate her own space in the name of personal dignity and social justice (Lal-19).

Devayani

Devayani in the novel, *In the Country of Deceit* is a young unmarried woman living alone in a small town in Karnataka called Rajnur – she is just recovering from the loss of her mother and starting life a new, symbolised by the demolition of her ancestral home and the building of a modern house. And with the modern house Devayani sheds her conservative outlook on life and her inhibitions. And this alteration comes with the arrival of Rani, a retired actress and Ashok, a police officer into Devayani's life. Devayani walks on the wild side with her relationship with Ashok and that is the pivot of the story. The novel peters out to a predictable end without much fuss.

To all intents and purposes, Devi is a flower of culture; she is a well-bred young lady, hailing from a sophisticated middle-class family. Deshpande nowhere indulges in describing her physical charms. Her character unfolds itself through patches of her action and behaviour. She is a post graduate in English literature and is working as a lecturer and her students address her, as 'madam' which little adds a new dimension to her personality. Liked and loved by one and all at home and in the outside world, she conducts herself with social poise and gentle deportment. Indeed, she is a lovable character. At home a loving and dutiful daughter nursing her parents during

a period of their illness, till they passed away. Savi, her elder sister is all sympathy for her, left alone, still remaining single or unwed and she has been the constant source of worry to Savi, her sister, her aunt Sindhu and her brother-in-law Shree. Often Savi used to feel guilty that Devi has been left lonely to look after her sick parents.

They believe that Devayani is really innocent in the sense that she does not realise the importance of marriage and they look forward to her being settled in life. What they imply by this phrase is that Devi must comfortably be married and set her own home. 'Innocent' as she is Devayani, pooh-poohs their opinion of her being innocent. She firmly believes that she has been much of the pains and pleasures of life, witnessed the painful death of her mother and father. She is thoroughly convinced that she has passed through the vicissitudes of life before she has completed her 26th year of life.

Ignorance or Innocence?

But if one pauses for a moment and reflect on Devi's opinion it does not take much thought to conclude that Devi is really "innocent". The word 'innocent' as used by her elders like Savi and Sindhu, is indeed euphemism for 'ignorance'. Devayani is ignorant of the subtle ways of this deceitful world. Ignorance must pay the price in one form or the other. The beholder gets an eyeful of her personal charm. Her character as a whole exudes a peculiar charm which is difficult to define.

Living in Small Town

Devayani, the protagonist, chooses to live alone in the small town of Rajnur after her parents' death, ignoring the gently voiced disapproval of her family and friends. Teaching English, creating a garden and making friends with Rani, a former actress who settles in the town with her husband and three children, Devayani's life is tranquil, imbued with a hard-won independence. Then she meets Ashok Chinappa, Rajnur's DSP, and they fall in love despite the fact that Ashok is much older, married and has a nine-year-old daughter—as both painfully acknowledge from the beginning, it is a relationship without a future.

Ashok Chinappa

For the first time, Devayani was impressed by his manly personality while at play. This casual meeting brewing up in intensity with the force of a gale develops into a vortex of passionate love that after the brief drama falls back to where it had started. Neither of them seems to have become disappointed for both of them have accepted the consequences to come in their way.

Method in the Madness

At first and casual reading, it seems that there is a shade of ambiguity about the character of Devayani but after a critical study of her character, the reader comes closer to her, and a close-up view of her person, understanding of her character slowly dawns on the reader. The reader understands that there is a method in the madness in yielding to Ashok, with a sense of complete surrender. Devi has not done it in haste or on the spur of the moment. If it had been so, she would have felt sorry for her thoughtless impulsive act. There is not the least sign of regret for what she had done. She did it very consciously, against her thorough knowledge of things; in spite of the foreseeable consequences, she ventures to do it with a strange sense of nonchalance.

Savi and Her Family

The domestic world of Savi and the members of her family circle have turned upside down when they learn of Devayani's revelation of the most shocking fact that she has deeply been in love with Ashok Chinappa, the DSP. All those Kith and Kin of her's love her and sympathize with her for the reasons best known to them. Savi's chief concern about Devi is the latter's marriage; Savi often feels a genuine sense of guilt that she could hardly be of any assistance to Devi when their mother Pushpa was struggling between life and death nor does she make any concrete efforts to see that Devi was comfortably married; she is indeed, left alone — a prisoner of loneliness.

Who Is Deceived?

In the country of deceit — who is deceived in the country of deceit? Devayani knows thoroughly well that Ashok has been married, now living with his wife and his nine-year-old daughter. Devayani and Ashok have acted towards each other against the full knowledge of their backgrounds. Ashok is a type Don Juan after his own fashion. And he makes no bones about his past and present. Devayani is not too innocent to be deceived by a man like Ashok.

If one dives or dives deep into the 'psyche' of Devayani, one certainly comes out with the truth that beneath the veneer of her sophisticated front there lies the primitive instinct of well glossed over by the outward mask of the so-called civilization, that explodes at an unguarded moment and betrays the ugly beast of what Freud calls *Libido* — the blind sex force that craves to fulfillment at any cost come what may. It overthrows the mask in a devil-may-care attitude. Only this psychological explanation would justify what seems to be a travesty of Devayani when she takes a u-turn in her behavior.

Craving for Variety

Ashok Chinappa, the police officer, in spite of the fact that he has been married and having a nine-year-old daughter is still like one who is at the threshold of youth craves for variety among young ladies, as it is his weakness. He does not regard seducing a young unmarried lady like Devayani, as a moral transgression (trespass) and it is unfortunate in the eyes of one and all (Savi, Shree, Sindhu) but not in her own eyes. When Savi speaks aggressively and disgustingly about Ashok, Devi reproaches saying, 'He hasn't deceived me. I knew he was married.' (Deshpande-185)

Caught in the Web of Subterfuge

Deshpande's unflinching gaze tracks the suffering, evasions and lies that overtake those caught in the web of subterfuge. There are no hostages taken 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. In this novel she takes up an 'other' mode of discourse, the scripture feminine, to authentically depict the working of the psyche of the central protagonist. This reminds us of Helen Cixous' view that writing is of the body and that a woman does not write like a man because she speaks with the body. Deshpande's forceful and authentic use of technique and language gives a feminine touch, and this makes *In the Country of Deceit* as a rare specimen of gyno-fiction. Deshpande, as a narrator, writes through her body inventing the impregnable language that

submerges, cuts through and gets "beyond the ultimate reverse-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence' (Cixous-256).

Tumultuous Twist Given to Life

The book revolves around the tumultuous twist given to the life of the protagonist, Devayani, as she breaks all set norms in the pursuit of happiness. There is something that prompts her pursuit for happiness, even if it is in the form of an 'illicit' relationship with a married IPS officer, Ashok Chinappa. In her sensitive portrayal of the same, Deshpande ensures that she portrays the relationship not as a whirlwind affair or a fling meant for affording guilty pleasure, but as a subtle, sensitive relationship that proves to be the Oases for Devayani in her vast desert of mundanity. There is a wistful melancholy in the way the relationship is treated having an expiry date from the start. Devi reflects about her relationship with the DSP and reminds his words 'I want to be with you more than anything else in the world' but feels that "It was not true. He had his life, his work, his wife, his daughter. All that I had was guilt. I would even learn to live with guilt. 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)

Revealing Female Psyche

Deshpande chiefly exposes the female psyche from all possible angles. Women are her protagonists. They are strong individuals and their individuality has been generously accentuated and only strong individuals can brave the social indignities of unusual magnitude. They have such courage of unshaken conviction that they stand in heroic defiance of the whole might of their surrounding world and circumstances. Devayani, despite being well-educated, is indeed impoverished of positive thinking. It seems that she is absolutely drained of thought even to the lees. She has come thoroughly under the spell of Ashok Chinappa's person that she behaves like one that has turned but to be a 'monomaniac.' A person who is drawn into the eddy of suicidal thought, all light of hope having extinguished, plunges into one sinister thought, to the total exclusion of any other precious thought. Was she really masochistic with regard to this self-consuming act? It is judged by any mode of logic or any code of ethics indeed, an insane act. She paves her path of self-abnegation or self-destruction. She appears to be the moth irresistibly tempted by a candle-flame, and thus courts its own tragic-end.

Devayani's is not even a Faustian bargain with regard to her self-consuming act. She behaves as if her past, present and future lie crammed in that solitary fateful moment that she stakes everything – her present and future. She has so carefully built up to this moment and this she invites her own tragedy to the despair of one and all. She seems to have been swept along by a strong current of passion for Ashok that she behaves as if her past, present and future lie crammed in that particular moment. Devayani after being proposed by the DSP, in a fit of movement falls prey to her temptation. Deshpande brings out this very effectively:

Then I saw him, learning against his car, looking at me. The moment I saw him, he straightened up. It seemed to me that he opened his arms out to me. But no, he was standing still; his arms were by his sides. He got into the car. As I walked towards the car, he began to move towards me. He stopped

when we met, got out and tried to take the bag from my hand. ‘No,’ I said, ‘no, it’s okay. (Deshpande-128)

Had she not seen or met Ashok Chinappa, this tragedy would not have happened, one would believe. Deshpande, perhaps, believes that certain uncontrollable conspiracy of circumstances will play havoc with an individual’s life.

Ashok is an adept at inveigling himself into young ladies’ affection. An indirect way of flattering young ladies to succumb to what you want them to do! He seems to have narcissistic tendency still lurking somewhere at the back of his mind — He flatters Devi thus:

Since the day I saw you in Priya’s house, your face has been with me. I can only call it being haunted. I keep seeing it all the time. And yet I want to see you. Do you know I go for a walk in the morning past your house hoping for a glimpse of you? Like a stupid teenager – a man of my age!’ he repeated with savage anger. And then, his voice rising, he said, ‘What am I doing! What am I saying! This is madness. (Deshpande-91)

Sudden Flashes of Insights

Deshpande takes the reader through the lanes and by lanes of human consciousness, subtly unfolding sudden flashes of insights into truth about human nature. They are sudden, arresting revelations to lead the reader to new and strange realms of human experience. All the sophistry or rationalization of Devayani is towards self-fulfillment; and she becomes, to the great annoyance and amazement, self-centered or ego-centric. She knows the perilous predicament in which she is caught. After receiving Shree’s letter Devi reflects egocentrically:

Wrong? Why is it wrong? Why is it that you can have your beloved and I can’t have mine? You knew when you chose Savi that your mother didn’t want her, but you went ahead and married Savi, though you knew it would hurt your mother. You know, as well as I do, that there are no boundaries for love, that you cannot draw a line and say, ‘I will not go beyond this’. (Deshpande-199)

Life’s Logic Defies Human Reasoning

It is due to the sad want of practical approach to life. Perhaps, Deshpande wants to say that life’s logic defies human reasoning — If there is any logic behind the zig-zag course of events that happen often times, independent of human will or volition. It sounds true; the mathematical formula that two plus two is four hardly holds any water in the case of man’s life. Devayani weighs the issue before her and gives a serious thought to the whole problem; and debates in her mind and argues deeply the pros and cons of the problem and finally she takes a decision that shocks one and all.

It’s the sleeping with that’s the problem, it’s this which has horrified Savi and, may be, will horrify Sindhu too. But how can you love a man and not sleep with him? How can you not long for the physical union? It’s not just

sex, it's showing your love through your body, it's seeing and feeling his love through his body. It's the desire for union, the most complete union two human beings can achieve. (Deshpande-226)

Her illogical thinking militates against her future happiness. No one is responsible for the tragic end of Devayani. She is not a teenager to be so easily hoodwinked by the police officer. Whenever Savi raises the subject of her marriage she objects in a tone that sounds ominously as if she wants to say "Me get married? Perish that thought" and Savi's silence thereafter sounds as if she means "then do things at your own peril."

One tends to look at things differently at different times. But there are certain norms in society especially where morals are concerned, which dictate one's sense of judgment. Now, how to judge Devayani in the context of her rash and freakish action? One cannot justify her act by any mode of logic or by any code of ethics. The very thought of it boggles one's mind or does she feel at the bottom of her subconscious mind that her bloom of youth fades as time fleets and she must make the best of time, youth and opportunity? The only way to justify her act, however bizarre it might seem, is that it was due to her ego-failure.

Her affair with Ashok has come to all the intimate members of her family as a bolt from the blue. They were stunned to speechlessness but when Savi tries to sound Devi's mind, how all this 'topsy-turvy' thing has happened, Devi quietly, answers without a bit perturbed and says "It just happened." Such a character as Devi may appear out of the way to the casual observer or reader. But such characters are not uncommon in our society.

Rooted in Culture

Shashi Deshpande's writings, rooted in culture in which she lives, remain sensitive to the common everyday events and experiences, and they give artistic expression to something that is simple and mundane. As suggested by Mala Renganathan,

Her feminism is peculiarly Indian in the sense that it is born out of the predicament of Indian women placed between contradictory identities: tradition and modernity, family and profession, culture and nature. Her art is intensely personal, not political. Her feminism rooted in the native environment tends to be humanistic and optimistic in its outlook. (Renganathan-72)

Does Deshpande really believe in the ornate goodness of man? More often than not her observations on human behaviour sound skeptical regarding relations between men and women, she does not seem to draw any line of demarcation such as social decorum demands but at the same time, she seldom encourages promiscuous relationship between the sexes. She neither conceals nor condemns such furtive desires on the part of man or a woman. The sacrifice of happiness at the altar of reputation is not something unknown to us. But it points out that Deshpande's country of deceit has a multilayered, profound depth waiting to be explored — deceiving the world is wrong but deceiving one's own self is a sin. She has deftly brought out the unpredictability of a woman's psyche through the character of Devayani. True to her characteristic

style, Deshpande has once again brought forth an unexplored avenue in the everyday life of an average Indian.

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