



In The Country of Deceit: Fight for the Right of Women

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In The Country of Deceit (2008), the latest novel of Shashi Deshpande, is the story of Devayani, a young unmarried woman living alone in a small town of Karnataka called Rajnur. This novel is different from earlier novels of Shashi Deshpande as the protagonists of the earlier novels are all married and become victim of male chauvinism, while the protagonist of this novel is unmarried, chooses the man whom she wants and establishes sexual relationship with him voluntarily. So her desire is in the centre of their relationship.

Devayani, the protagonist of the novel, is just recovering from the loss of her mother and starting life a new which is symbolized by the demolition of her ancestral home and the building of a modern house. For Devayani, Shashi Deshpande in "In the First Person" writes:

I also know that Devayani, a character from one of those novels, is still waiting for me to write another, to give her a stage on which she can play a role again (Deshpande : 2003, 28).

Devayani is the only well developed character of this novel. She is generous, long suffering and patient with all the calamities thrown her way like father's death, mother's illness and her mother's ultimate death. Above all, she is honest, honest to her own self. Devayani 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, developing a garden and making friendship with a self – sufficient former actress Rani who settles in the town with her husband and her three children Roshni, the daughter of her first marriage, Neha and Rohan, Devayani's life is tranquil, imbued with a hard won independence. Then she meets Ashok Chinappa, the new District Superintendent of Police in Rajnur. They fall in love despite the fact that Ashok is much older, married and as both painfully acknowledge from the very beginning – it is a relationship without a future.

Sindhu, the aunt of Devayani is suffering from breast cancer and the doctor advises her for breast surgery. Keshav, her husband worries a lot and holds her hands before surgery. At that time, Sindhu wants to tell him :

Don't hold my hand, hold my breast, touch it, caress it, and kiss it. It has given you and me so much pleasure. Let me know that pleasure once again (Deshpande : 2008, 41).

Sindhu is a traditional woman who thinks that the happiness and satisfaction of the husband is the only means of fulfillment for a woman. She is worried as her one breast; the means of her and her husband's pleasure will be removed through surgery. As she writes:

...that life is lived through the body. Not such a new thought, you'll say. But when you come to some knowledge on your own, it's always bright and shining, like a newly minted coin (Deshpande : 2008, 41 - 42).

The incident described by Sindhu in her letter to Devayani which she has seen on the T.V. show where people are willing to tell the world the kind of things what they directly can't say. This time the guest is a woman who is suffering from breast cancer. She desires to remove all her clothes in the nightclub and wants to dance before audience and she does it. In the beginning, this incident surprises and shocks Sindhu but later she realizes that the purpose of that lady is not showing vulgarity but she wants to show the world her body and also wants to announce to the world that her body is still here. It is still alive. In this way, she struggles to survive her body as Sindhu herself tries to survive her body (breast) before surgery. Both the female characters fight for their existence. That's why she requests Keshav to hold her breasts, not hands. As narrated by Sindhu:

Anyway that day the guest was a woman who'd had breast cancer ... removing your clothes in nightclub and dancing? Striptease? Anyway that's what she wanted to do and she did it ... And I thought – imagine a woman in India saying this! Imagine the audience cheering a woman who says it! ... But I cheered the woman as much as the audience did. Because now I can understand why she wanted to do such a strange thing. She wanted to show the world her body, she wanted to announce to the world – my body is here, I'm



still here, I'm alive exactly the way I had wanted Keshav to hold my breast when I thought I would lose it (Deshpande : 2008, 42).

For that woman, her body and its demands are important. Sindhu also tries to explain Devayani about her bodily desires as she is an unmarried young woman and the Indian culture does not allow any unmarried woman to fulfill her bodily desires without marriage. By quoting this:

I come to the point: you are still young; your natural desires will be with you for many years. Our country does not allow women to fulfill these desires without marriage ... I want you to think of this. Remember, this is a very natural feeling, a very natural desire and you have a right to expect your life to contain this anand as well (Deshpande : 2008, 42 - 43).

None can remain aloof from this bodily hunger. Even Rani's husband Kailash Navilur's father is not an exception. Though he is a school teacher in the National school, there is a big scandal when he elopes with a much younger colleague. He abandons his wife and two young sons. His wife suffers a lot and faces many hardships in bringing up their sons:

His [KN's] father had been a school teacher who had, as she put it, run away with a much younger colleague, abandoning his wife and two young sons. The wife had suffered great hardships and had brought up her sons on her own (Deshpande : 2008, 47).

In her anger his wife has burnt all his books. She brings "them out and made a bonfire of them, that she stood there grimly until the last book was burnt" (Deshpande : 2008, 79 -80). In fact, the fire is a symbol of her anguish and agony towards her husband. But within two months, her husband wants to return. There is a debate if she will allow him to come back. As she is a traditional woman, she allows him to come back. But has there been a woman from new generation, she will have firmly said 'no' to him. According to Sindhu's daughter Tara, that woman has to learn to live independently and discards her husband from her life. According to her, a woman has to fight for her dignity and honour. Woman is not only a toy of the hands of man as where and when he desires to break it and moves to another toy.

Even the Hindi teacher in Kusuma's school runs away with a girl. He is a married man while that girl is only in her tender age. Thus, an unmarried woman has to be more careful than the married one. Devayani is an unmarried woman and it is really difficult for her to save herself from this deceit of love. Commenting on the discriminatory attitude of society, Annis Pratt remarks:

Society considers the sex experiences of man as attributes of her general development, while similar experiences in the life of women are looked upon as a terrible calamity, a loss of honour and of all that is good and noble in a human being (Pratt : 1981, 37).

Thus, sexuality is the main force or the driving energy behind the body's self-expression. From Freud to Foucault, sexuality has been a subject of intense debate. In India, overt sexuality is considered as an act of shame for both a woman and a man. In fact, a female body's fulfillment comes only in the bonding with a male body, in marriage. But marriage gets fractured where bodily gratification becomes an illusion and remains a brute force.

It also happens to Devayani when Ashok meets her at Rani's house. He falls in love with Rani at first sight, though he is a married man and a father of a daughter. He falls in love with her in such a way that like a teenager he wishes to see her all the time and waits whole day for a small glimpse of her.

Though Ashok does not force Devayani to love him, she finally accepts him as his lover. For the first time, when they meet at the lonely place, they establish sexual relationship:

He put his arms around me, held me for a moment and let me go. He then cupped my face in his two hands and looked into my face. I could feel his breath on my face. My heart was fluttering widely within me. He began to trace my features with his fingers – my eyebrows, my nose, my chin, my lips. I could never have imagined that such a gentle touch, a touch so light that I could scarcely feel it, could evoke such a strong response from my body. Then it was the turn of his lips, which touched my cheeks, my forehead, my eyes, finally came to my lips and rested gently on them... And now I was part of it too, my lips were seeking him, my hands began roving over his body, my body made room for him and finally, painfully , joyfully , accepted him (Deshpande : 2008, 131 – 132).

Thus, Devayani – Ashok relationship is at the centre of this novel. Though both make love many times, they are well aware of the fact that their relationship is without future. Many times, Devayani suffers from guilty consciousness. The fact is that their relationship is illicit and the society does not accept the relationship between a married man and an unmarried woman. Savitri's (Devayani's sister) explanation makes her these feelings strong and she suffers from inner turmoil. At last, though she desperately loves him, she tries to avoid him and does not even accept the birthday gift offered by him.

Here, Devayani fights against the age old patriarchal system and tries to establish that a woman is no longer a puppet in the hands of male hegemony. Devayani is a bold woman and does not believe in patriarchal ideology. She accepts Ashok's love



because she thinks that marriage is not the only means of the fulfillment of sexual desires. Through this relationship, she achieves whatever she desires – love, sex, loyalty, happiness etc. She also receives mutual understanding from Ashok. She does not blame Ashok for this relationship as she also longs for bodily union. Instead of suffocating marriage as in other novels we see, she prefers free relationship with Ashok:

He only wants to sleep with you, he only wants your body, Savi said. Yes, he took me to bed the first time we were together, but I wanted it too, Shree. I was frightened, but my God, I wanted it too. And it must have been the right thing to do, because there was no awkwardness between us after that, there were no barriers between us. We were comfortable with each other (Deshpande : 2008, 200).

Both Ashok and Devayani are well aware of that “there’s no future of us, both of us know that. We know we have to give this up, sometime, some day” (Deshpande : 2008, 201). At last, Ashok goes to Bangalore as he gets seniority and Devayani lives alone. No one is there to caress her, to kiss her, to love her. But she is ready to face this situation bravely. The end of their relationship as well as of this novel is very positive. Though Ashok leaves Rajnur and goes far away from Devayani’s life, she starts to think in a new way. Again with determination, she decides to live the life in a new way though she lives in “a constant struggle between trying to forget and wanting to remember”(259).

Even the relationship between Rani and KN is not satisfactory. The purpose of their marriage is not based on true love. The purpose of Rani selecting KN is to spend “easy life with a wealthy man, a heaven after the turbulence of her earlier life” (158) while the purpose of KN selecting Rani is to have “a beautiful wife and one more possession he could be proud of”(158). Such a couple cannot live happily. Though they live under one roof, their souls always remain aloof. They don’t have intimate relationship.

The relationship between Rani and Mahesh Tiwari, her lover whom she calls Maheshji was not happy too. They also had quarrelled many times. There were many reasons like his drinking habit, his idleness, his wife and her demand for a divorce. Thus Rani, though she was a well known actress, became the victim of male harassment. Many times, she got angry, became abusive and sometimes violent.

Like Devayani, Rani also fights for her self and dignity. Rani’s decision of leaving Maheshji is quite appropriate. She is firm in her decision. Despite repeated calls from Mahesh and threats of suicide, she does not return to him as Rani is no longer ready to humiliate herself in the hands of male like Mahesh Tiwari.

Besides, there are various examples and incidents which expose violence against woman’s body. The film story narrated by Sindhu regarding separation of husband and wife is one such example. After a long time, when they meet, they start discussing the reasons of their separation and the reasons are lack of understanding and communication during sexual intercourse. The difference between male and female’s sexual desire is that man desires sex while woman desires love along with sex. But man does not understand the need of a woman which brings disaster in the marriage. As described here:

The point is, the man always says: I want to be comfortable, I want to be looked after, I want children, I want love, I want sex, sex, sex, sex ...

The woman says : I want children, I want to be looked after, I want to be loved, tell me you love me, I want love, love, love, love ... (Deshpande : 2008, 98).

The traditional mind set to ignore woman’s sexuality and to consider a woman immoral and frivolous, if she gives expression to her pleasures in sex. But now, sex is being viewed by more and more women as a physical need. Here, the woman’s separation from her husband shows her desire for self – esteem. She is no longer ready to tolerate physical suppression or marital rape of her husband. In this regards, Promilla Kapur remarks:

All these findings suggest that the negative attitude towards sex or that of condemnation has lost ground considerably and the positive attitude regarding sex as one on the needs of every human being is emerging (Kapur : 1973, 220).

There are some of the incidents in the novel where women become helpless and become victim of men’s lust. The film from which Rani again enters into the film industry is “Sannata”. The theme of this film is taken from the past incident of Devayani’s school life when she, along with four friends, passed through the Mango grove. The owner of the grove caught one of the girls from their group named Shanti and the remaining children, out of fear, ran away from there leaving Shanti. Shanti caught by that owner became the victim of bodily harassment:

Shanti the oldest among us, Shanti whose already developed figure seems to be bursting out of her school uniform. The hand drops casually from her shoulder to her breast. Her body makes an involuntary movement, she cringes. His face changes, he moves closer to her, he says something to her, he seems to forget us ... In a few moments, she joins us. She stops, bending forwards from her waist as if to ease the pain in her guts. We watch her until she straightens up , until she recovers (Deshpande : 2008, 170 -171).



Through this incident, the theme of the film is about the rape of a woman when she was a girl. In a way, rape is only a game for film makers to grab awards, nothing else:

And a rape victim's was a good role; as Sadhu had candidly said, there was a much greater possibility of getting an award with such a role (Deshpande : 2008, 168).

The second incident is about the harassment of Devayani herself. After the meeting with the producer and the director of the film "Sannata", when Devayani was sitting alone, one of the young men from the boisterous group of men at the another table of the restaurant got up, walked to her and tried to harass her by putting hands on her shoulder :

'Why are you sitting alone? Come and join us'.

'No thanks'.

'Oh, come on. Be a sport'.

'No, I'm okay'.

'I'll join you then. We can lunch together'.

'No, I want to be alone'.

'I know you don't mean that'.

He sat down in the chair across me. I got up, but he got up too and put his hand on my shoulder.

'Be a good girl, sit down. Let's have a good time' (Deshpande : 2008, 141).

Meanwhile, Sadhu, Rani's secretary entered the restaurant and tackled the whole incident.

Another incident is that when Devayani was in school at Rajnur, there was a talk about an adulterous couple which was caught by the woman's husband in his own home at the day time. Because of the patriarchal ideology, this couple met tragic end. The couple was caught in the act, people snatched their clothes and made them naked:

Impossible to connect it to the ugliness of the couple in Rajnur, caught in the act, snatching at their clothes, trying to cover their nakedness, left with nothing, not even a shred of dignity (Deshpande : 2008, 149).

Even Kusuma's husband had a mistress for a long time. His mistress was old enough to be his mother; and the society along with Kusuma called her "that fat and ugly whore" (149). All these incidents show the illtreatment meted out to women in the patriarchal society. All the female characters except Devayani become victim of patriarchal ideology. Only Devayani fights for her rights, comes out of it and establishes herself identity.

Here, Devayani proves that marriage may not offer the best of all possible worlds to a man and a woman for neither a man nor a woman is complete in himself or herself. Both biologically and emotionally need each other and if they can develop a measure of harmony in their relations, so much the better.

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