



Exploring Individual Dilemmas and Expectations: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *In the Country of Deceit*

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande's, *In the Country of Deceit* (2008) deals with the theme of human relationship, individuality, self-assertion, adult love amidst the backdrop of deception and societal norms. She takes up the theme of love against the backdrop of the feminine sensibility, the author goes on to describe the protagonist's quest in search of answers to some of the existential questions of life. The novel is a subtle, exploration of the consequences of betrayal on people's lives and relationships. The novel is not just a story of adultery as the undercurrent reveals deeper aspects of life and relationships. The novel's main focus is on the fact that such relationships are without future. This article is an effort to understand the quest and dilemmas of the protagonist while asserting her individuality in a traditional society.

Keywords: Human relationship, Individuality, Dilemma, Tradition

Introduction:

Shashi Deshpande, a renowned author of Indian English Writing, has often delved into the complexities of human relationships and the quest for individuality in her works. Her novel *In the Country of Deceit* (2008) also deals with the theme of human relationship, individuality, self-assertion, adult love amidst the backdrop of deception and societal norms. Deshpande believes that love is a basic human emotion and there is nothing banal about it. However, one cannot walk away from the consequences of the choices one makes in life. In this way while taking up the theme of love against the backdrop of the feminine sensibility, the author goes on to describe the protagonist's quest in search of answers to some of the existential questions of life. The novel is a subtle, exploration of the consequences of betrayal on people's lives and relationships. The novel is not just a story of adultery as the undercurrent reveals deeper aspects of life and relationships. The novel's main focus is on the

fact that such relationships are without future. The narrative comprises letters written by family members of Devayani such as, Sindhu (her aunt called Sindhuatya), Sindhu's husband Keshav, Savitri (her own sister), Shree (her brother-in-law), cousin sister Kshama etc. As revealed in the novel, these members are not living with her but they are seriously concerned about her welfare. The ties of kinship are obvious in their letters. The narrative of this novel is divided into four segments with titles: "Ground Zero", "Epiphany", "The Country of Deceit" and "Unspooling", each highlighting the different phases of Devayani's life. This article is an effort to understand the quest and dilemmas of the protagonist while asserting her individuality in a traditional society.

The story of the novel centers around the tumultuous life of the protagonist, Devayani Mudhol, an educated, middle-class unmarried woman in her late twenties, who bears the burden of her family on her young shoulders stoically on account of her father's death, financial problems, and her mother's death. The circumstances of her life lead her to remain confined to Rajnur, a small town of Karnataka. The novel opens with Devayani, just recovering from the loss of her mother and starting life anew. This is symbolized by the demolition and the destruction of the old ancestral house and construction of a new house in its place. She is quite happy with her tranquil life. However, it is soon disturbed when she meets Ashok Chinappa, the newly posted DSP (District Superintendent of Police) of Rajnur at her actress-friend Rani's house. The DSP becomes desperate for her love and waits with great perseverance for her affirmation. Devayani moving away from a traditional norm in search of fulfilment falls in love with him despite the fact that Ashok Chinappa is much older and already married and father of two kids. She knows from the very beginning that it is a relationship without future, as Ashok tells her on the very first meeting, "I can promise you nothing" (114). Without heeding societal code, Devayani declares her love for Ashok before her elder sister, Savitri and brother-in-law, Shree. She is not demanding in her relationship and does not want Ashok to walk away from his family comprising his wife and a daughter. Devayani is self-willed, self-driven and independent enough to step out of this relationship after she realises that the relationship would not be possible to continue.

The relationship between Devayani and Ashok forms the crux of the novel. Devayani is independent in her thoughts and actions. She is generous, defiant and honest to herself. Upon meeting Ashok at Rani's (a film actor) place, Devayani's life changes for all times to come. The persistence with which the DSP waits for Devayani's affirmation to this relationship becomes very intriguing. She is conscious of the pitfalls on entering this relationship. Her following words reveal the complexities of her emotions involved and her dilemma:

But we're not boy and girl. He's a man with a family. A wife and children. And I am a woman nearing thirty. No more conversations, not even monosyllabic answers. Even a 'yes' and a 'no' can give you away. Why, even silence can give you away! (78)

Both the DSP and the protagonist are fully aware of the fact that there is no future of their relationship. The police officer is not only married but also has a nine-year old daughter whom he loves very much. But Devayani is unable to restrain herself from her fascination for Ashok

I can't go back. The rule of life is that movement is always forwards. You can't go back. There's no choice in the matter. The only way to cheat time is through memory. And memory now gives me back nothing, but his words, 'I would wait all day for a small glimpse of you'. And 'I can promise you nothing'. All else erased. Deleted. As if my life began the moment he crossed the room and came to speak to me. (115-116)

Despite being modern in outlook, sensitive, educated, and bold, Devayani is introspective. She exhibits remarkable understanding of the situation she is in along with the world around her. She is straight in dealing with her family members and that is why her mother calls her, "Transparent as a clean piece of glass" (147). Devayani does not heed societal norms and consciously decides to indulge in this relationship with a married man. She overcomes her reserved mindset and realises that only Ashok can make her experience joy in her life.

She does not allow the sense of guilt overwhelm her mind as she holds Ashok equally responsible for this extra-marital affair. She says, "I'm not doing anything wrong. It's you – you are committed, you are... you are married. And I thought marriage and wondered- how can you do this?" (130). For Devayani, body is an important mean to actualise the deeper aspects of love but her relationship with Ashok is much more than mere sex. She says:

We talk, we laugh, I can say to him what I've never said to anyone, he listens to me the way no one has listened to me before, making each word of mine a precious jewel. I don't know how many couples get this, but for me—I never expected this; this complete sharing of everything, it's like a miracle. (199-200)

The lines of the epigraph of this novel are, "Love is not mere pleasure, a thing of memory, it is a state of intense vulnerability and beauty". This experience of deep sharing and companionship with Ashok helps her to overcome the grief of her dead mother and makes her become livelier and more vibrant to the world around her.

Devayani also suffers from pricks in her conscience as she has a constant realisation of the fact that she is doing wrong. There is no moral justification to it. She says, "I knew it was wrong, nothing could make it not wrong. And yet, I had rushed into it. Why had I done it?" (142). She realizes that her position is that of a "Mistress", "the other woman", "the kept woman" (142) but she finds herself unable to keep herself away from him. Devayani is also aware of the limitations of this kind of relationship in another context. While she sees her sister Savitri sleeping with her children, she realizes, "I will never know this; I thought in a sudden pang of grief, I shall never have children" (183). She is weighed down with guilt and feels that such kind of relationship would lead her to a disastrous end. The following words reveal her psyche:

I had entered the country of deceit. I could no longer be open and honest with people I loved; I had to deceive them. I was glad they were far away, these two women who loved me. If they were here, they would have known something had happened to me. (147)

Devayani undergoes a serious conflict between love and family honour. After entering into the “country of deceit” volitionally, she gradually realizes that she has lost the streak of forthrightness and candour in her behaviour with her loved ones. Sense of compunction weighs heavy on her mind as she feels cheap and like an “adulteress” (148). When Ashok tells her that he cannot lose his daughter and family, Devayani lets him go without any feeling of rancour. Devayani is able to understand his dilemma of getting caught between love and family responsibilities but she finally goes for her choice of family honour.

She regrets and says, “I wonder whether this union is what we long for all our lives. And you and I were lucky to have it. But we can’t go on, that is the truth, however precious this is to us, we can’t go on” (237-238). The circumstances repeatedly make Devayani realize that adultery and family are the two different polarities that can never meet. Here is an extract revealing her thoughts:

I now realized that adultery remains adultery, whoever the couple maybe. That it is always riddled with guilt and fear, constantly swinging between euphoria and despair. I knew this too, that the main preoccupation of all adulterous couples is: how do we meet? And where? (149)

Shree her brother-in-law too makes her aware of futility of such relationships:

What future do you have with this man? You have two alternatives: you go on this way, continue to have a clandestine affair, and remain—what? A mistress? The other woman? Or you have the ‘respectable’ option—he can divorce his wife and marry you. But that means destroying a marriage, a family (I believe there is a child). I can’t see the Devi I know finding happiness in such a situation. Let me tell you one thing, Devi—there are many things you need to live together in marriage. But to me the most important is loyalty. Only if there’s loyalty can you have an honourable marriage. And how can you expect a man who is disloyal to his wife and his marriage to be loyal to you? (197-198)

Shree, her brother-in-law, is more like a guide and friend to her. She realizes that she has deceived her family members and loved ones by entering into this relationship with Ashok. In her letter to Ashok she writes:

I’m tired of lying and deceiving others. I have always known it is much worse for you. Like I said, there are greater claims on your commitment, or your loyalty, than there are mine. But I too have my bonds and I can’t go on lying to the people I love, I can’t go on deceiving them. (237)

Thus, the ultimate realization that love alone is not sufficient for a dignified life, dawns upon Devayani and she lets Ashok go with grace and pain of parting in her heart. When Ashok departs, she “experiences her grief and loneliness which were trying to swamp and submerge her” (Rai 13). Her aunt Sindhu’s words, “Nothing remains unchanged. Love gets diluted, hate is forgotten and friendship and enmity keep shifting all the time” enable her to endure her grief. The memory of Ashok’s love gives her strength (257). Like Madhu in *Small Remedies* “Devayani too finds memory as a source of comfort

to which she could restore in time of distress” (Narula 203). She is aware that her relationship with Ashok can never get legitimacy, but she does not want to erase the memory of happy moments spent with him. Devayani finally decides to get on with her life. She says:

I have to get on with my life. There is much more to be done. I have to get the house ready for Keshav and Sindhu. And then Savi and the children will be here, and, possibly, Bakula and her son as well. The house will be full and noisy, the children will race through it, laughing and playing [...] but there will also be many happy memories and much laughter. And I will join them, I *will* join them. How can I stay out of their circle of love and laughter? [...] I will think of the gentle presence of our mother, serene, now that she is beyond physical suffering, hovering around us. I will hope that our father’s tortured soul will be at peace too, seeing Savi, me and the children in this house, seeing it brimming with happiness. (258)

Devayani has the love and support of her close family members including her sister Savitri, brother-in-law Shree, aunt Sindhu, uncle Keshav, cousins Kshama, Gundu, Tara and Vidya and their children. Devayani’s relationship with her sister, Savitri is full of love and care for each other. Savitri is a protective sister epitomizing all the traditional beliefs surrounding marriage and adultery. She becomes anxious after knowing about Devayani’s affair with Ashok as she doubts his integrity. She doubts that he is merely interested in sex and nothing else. She tells Devayani, “He’ll sleep with you and dump you. He’s using you, he needs your body, that’s all he wants” (184). She is not ready to accept Ashok’s presence in her sister’s life because she worries about her being hurt. When she meets Ashok at Pune she interrogates him and accuses him of exploiting her innocent sister. The following piece of conversation shows her love and concern for her sister:

‘Do you know what you’re doing to my sister?’

‘I...’

‘She’ so innocent, so clean and you...’

‘Savi’

‘Your sister is very precious to me, more precious than anything else in the world.’

‘More than your wife and daughter?’ (220)

Savitri is chagrined, anxious, bewildered, upset even distressed but does not denounce her. She feels guilty that she left Devayani to suffer alone which spoiled her life and happiness. The strong bond of sisterly love is projected through Savitri and Devayani’s character. Savitri’s children Arjun and Charu get same motherly affection from Devayani side. When Devayani comes to know that Savitri’s son Arjun is seriously ill and is admitted in ICU, she thinks it might be a kind of punishment given by God to them on account of her immoral relationship with Ashok. While going to Delhi to see him, she prays to God, “*let Arjun be all right, I’ll give up Ashok, I’m doing wrong, this is a punishment, but I’ll give up*

Ashok, I promise..." (177). She is pacified like a real mother after knowing that he is out of danger. Such incidents reveal the binding vine of relationships around Devayani which never make her feel alienated.

Devayani shares a comfortable bonding of brotherly love with her sister's husband, Shree. As a brother-in-law he feels sorry for Devayani and Ashok and gently tries his best to guide her. In one of his letters to Devayani he advises, "Think of what you are doing to yourself, making yourself so vulnerable, open to hurt and suffering, making yourself the target of people's vile tongues" (197). Devayani respects his views and candidly shares her feelings about Ashok with him. Shree is fully aware that Devayani is mature enough to take right decision for her life and he also shows respect for her autonomy.

Sindhu, (sister of Devayani's father) Devayani aunt is a mother-like figure to Devayani, who feels concerned about the welfare of Devayani, her niece. She stays in U.S.A but she is in touch with Devayani through letters and phone-calls. Though she is far off, yet she is close to Devayani through her letters. Her advices and suggestions imparted through her letters show her mature perspective, marked by wisdom. Sindhu points out to Devayani in one of her letters, "Our country does not allow women to fulfil these desires without marriage" (42-43). Sindhu is a clear-sighted, light-hearted, candid, practical and admirable and caring lady. After losing her first husband she marries Keshav, younger than her and lives happily. Thus she emerges as an unconventional lady who does not sacrifice her for the sake of societal honour. It is a love marriage which is not accepted by her mother. But she is always concerned about Devayani's welfare and searches suitable alliance for her but leaves everything to Devayani. Though Sindhu is a patient of cancer yet she is very optimistic and practical. She works like a guide to Devayani. She writes letters to Devayani from her daughter's home in US. It is mainly through her letters that Devayani is forced to consider and reconsider her position and comes to take her own decision. Sindhu is also shocked and upset after knowing about Devayani's relationship with Ashok. In one of her letters to Devayani, Sindhu writes, "it will be the best thing for you to forget all this" (257). Through Sindhu's inspiring and motivating letters Devayani is encouraged to put an end to her relationship with Ashok.

While trying to solve the problems related to her property Devayani comes to know about her maternal grand-parents (ajja and ajji) that her grandfather, Krishna Bhat (ajja) was a wise and wealthy man who attained an eminent position in society by his hard work and intelligence. But her ajji was an arrogant lady and considered her husband inferior to her. Janardhan Rao mentions in his letter to Devayani that her "ajji always thought she was superior" to her ajja (101). She was daughter of a "well-to-do lawyer" and a "prominent Congressman" (101). Krishna Bhat had a great love for his two daughters Kamala and Pushpa. But ajji was a typical orthodox Indian lady who ignored her sick daughter Pushpa, as she was a patient of epilepsy. Krishna Bhat was sympathetic towards Pushpa and gifted the Hatthihola land to her. The gift later on becomes a matter of litigation and creates the dispute in the backdrop of the main story.

Devayani is emotionally attached to her parents Vasant and Pushpa. Devayani's mother, Pushpa, a responsible and dutiful lady was a deeply committed to her husband. Pushpa was a simple and down to earth woman who had no pride for her father's wealth and position. Devayani's father Vasant was a man of self-respect who never touched his wife Pushpa's money despite the financial problems. When Devayani thinks of her parents, she realizes that her parents did not enjoy a harmonious relationship. Her father Vasant, a rigid follower of his ideals, spent his whole life in extreme poverty and suffered humiliation and public disgrace and committed suicide. In contrast to Vasant, Pushpa accepted her husband's family whole-heartedly. She was a devoted wife and mother. Pushpa had been victim of her mother's neglect and abuse but she never treated her daughters harshly like her mother.

The novel also focuses on an uncaring and ambitious mother through Rani, the ex-actress and friend of Devayani, who is a good actress but an indifferent mother to her children. She is very keen to go back to the film world and start a film which can re-establish her. Her elder daughter Roshini is much annoyed with the life-style of her mother and tells Devayani, "I have lost my mother to the movie world. How can I feel good about it?" (172). She feels ignored and misses the motherly attachment from Rani. Through Rani's character the author has thrown light on the life-style of the people of the film world and has focused on the adverse effects of absence of familial bonds and its impact on the children.

Devayani is one of Deshpande's modern women and presents "a beautiful blend of head and heart" (Sharma 27). She is aware of this fact that by loving Ashok she is entering into a 'country of deceit' and that this relationship is without future. Devayani struggles to make sense of life and to understand the place of her love in the scheme of things. She is aware of the irony of her life she is placed in but she finds herself unable to keep herself away from him. But finally she manages to overpower her love and leaves Ashok for the sake of honour of her family. She decides to 'move on' in her life cherishing the sweet memories of love of Ashok.

Devayani always finds herself surrounded by love and care of her family members which sustain her during trying moments of her life. The familial bonds with her near and dear ones like Savitri (her sister), Shree (her brother-in-law) and Sindhu (her aunt) become the binding vine for her from whom she derives strength and courage for her survival in the absence of her parents and Ashok in her life. The job offered by Iqbal further enables Devayani to redefine her life. Her quest thus ends with the realization that she cannot exist without her near and dear ones of her family life and that she can never find fulfillment without her familial bonds. Her words "I will join them. How can I stay out of their circle of love and laughter?" (258) mark the end of her quest. Both Ashok and Devayani fall in love despite the acknowledgement of the fact that such relationships may bring temporary joy to them but finally point towards a bleak future. Family is the only meaningful entity in one's life. This tinge of message of the novel is finally reflected in Ashok's return to his family members. Ashok finds himself incapable of leaving his family and his daughter. Devayani's quest too ends with her realization of the responsibilities towards her family members—her sister Savitri, brother-in-law Shree, their children and

her aunt Sindhu. Thus, the bold, independent and strong Devyani is ready to take refuge in her own family with the memory of her short-lived love-affair with Ashok.

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