Love, Sex, Opportunity and Remorse: *In the Country of Deceit*

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Dr. Ashok Kumar in his essay *Manju Kapur’s The Immigrant: Dilemma of the Second Sex* expresses his views on the sex that “Sex is a very important part in the life of human beings but its propriety and relevance in Indian context cannot be ignored”. (1)

As the growing numbers of Indian women writers started stepping into the candid erotic fictional world with an undaunted saga, men has also dared to emerge from the sleeping room rather to confine themselves in it. In the western countries, women have already been set up their image by emerging as erotic fictional writers of diarist porn and erotic art. It does not mean that in India there is a lack of female fantasy but since antiquity India have been occupying a leading place of such writers. Even in the 15th century Mirabai emerged as a new woman as she endeavored against odds by picking up the gauntlet of traditional norms of that society and she also covered the erotic field where few women had dared to go before. She explicitly indicated her erotic intention through her songs and hymns to Lord Krishna:

“the sweetness of his lips is a pot of nectar;
That’s the only curd for which I crave;
Mira’s lord is Giridhar Nagar;
He will feed me nectar again and again” (2)

Kamala Das, Sobha De, Shashi Deshpande, Kamla Markandya, Anita Desai and Manju Kapur are some pioneer writers of erotic fictional world in the topical era who have played a significant role and contributed comprehensively in the erotic field. On the other hand western influence has also lent a hand in awaking the women writers who want to frame the boundary of erotic fictions. The modern Indian women writers have also tried to pen all about physical structural of men and women. They also emphasized on the biological difference which highlights the male dependency syndrome. They have also covered the Lesbian desire and primordial needs below middle class from all angles.

Love is too difficult question to find out the answer. The definition and clarity of love changes not only from time to time but it also alters with each different relationship and depend more on its concept of gravity, value, and intricacy. The very existence of love is considered to be false and meaningless in the eyes of modern society. Its existence is denied due to hatred and brutality which create a sharp bitterness in relationships. In its broad sense on meaning it is full of calmness, meekness, and happiness but on the other hand it may be a protector, preserver and benevolent. It can occur between two or more persons. Being romantic it may be deep, intense, reckless and endless. It may be common on interpersonal and sexual relationship. The term Platonic love, familial love and religious love are also matter of great affection.

*In the Country of Deceit* is Shashi Deshpande’s latest novel which was published in 2008. With her extraordinary literary and inventive theoretical power, she presents human aspects comprehensively in a new light which is beyond supposition to express so well. Through the novel, she depicts a theme of myriad feelings of love. This is an erotic story which explores the sex, opportunity and remorse that often take place in love.

The story begins with the demolition of the family house symbolically means that a silver line in the dark, a fresh beginning, and a season of renewal which adds new colours to the central character Devayani Mudhol’s life are followed. Shashi Deshpande’s steady look tracks the suffering prevarication and deceit that overtake those caught in the web of deception. However there is no prisoner taken in the country of deceit yet the lives is fully scarred. Devayani, as a,
“New Woman” shows patience, courage and pleasing spirit to face the ensuing problems in life with undaunted temperament. Through her protagonist, the novelist depicts the fact that one must understand the meaning of life and learn how to face it. She gives Devayani a new perception of life by making her more compassionate and tolerant of human frailty. Devayani challenges all the suggestions given to her by her kith and kin from time to time to marry and live happily.

Love makes the story more interesting. This story highlights the love making and its final conclusion. Love is seen altering into sex whenever it finds opportunity but ultimately when the lovers reach on its peak they have to face the dire consequence if the love is not in accordance with the petty norms of orthodox society as the concocted customs which do not allow to let the soul move freely because it is tied with a tether of traditional conduct by some contractors of social crusaders who do not try to understand the fragile sound of love of modernity. Love may be valueless if it is taken as merely domineering. Love can flourish as long as it is free and natural. It can not bound and cut by any rope of custom and scythe of farmer. It is an arbitrary, which will not remain within any limit set by law or custom.

In Deshpande’s view, when women try to get knowledge, they do not start light. They are already burdened with a baggage that has been given to them. The fact is that they don’t start with a picture of themselves on a clean slate but already there are things inscribed on it which told to them by orthodox society that determine to keep them in their confined area of dreams, expectation, behavioural pattern. In her conversation with Gita Viswanath, Shashi Deshpande opines that "we are shaped by our childhood and our parents". (3) The society’s views about Indian women and their behavioural patterns are inscribed and pre-determined by the caste into which one is born. The values and traditions of a culture that upholds archetypal images of woman are imposed on the faminity.

In the Country of Deceit Devayani and her sister Savi demolish her old house and start to build a new one. They are looking at the empty space where once the house of their childhood was. The new house is completely changed one, it is large, spacious, filled with light. When there is dark still there is silver line which symbolizes hope. Although it is true that seeing the end of anything is painful but the demolition of the old house was not painful for both of them but it was a beginning. Devayani quotes that “this was not an end, but a beginning. A fresh start. A clean slate (Deshpande Deceit.3)” Of course, this is followed by the sense of a fresh start, and a season of renewal but what this new season holds in store for Devayani, the narrator, a young, single woman who lives on her own in a small town called Rajnur, is just recovering from the loss of her mother who had died from long illness. The new house was designed, supervised by the architect-sister so that it might give most satisfaction to its new inhabitant, Devayani, the female protagonist. She explains that “I felt as if I was waiting for the curtain to go up, waiting for something to happen (Deshpande Deceit.8)”

Devi starts life anew, with the modern house and sheds her conservative outlook on life. This alteration comes with the arrival of Rani, a retired actress and Ashok, a police officer into Devyani’s life. Seeing the new house was the happiest moment for Savi also. While she returns with her doctor husband and children to Delhi, Devayani moves into the new house, happy to remain in their hometown Rajnur. She spreading her arms wide and said that she had done that. Devayany says:

“… For her this was a new beginning. She was suddenly watching up with her life, with all that she had given up when Arjun was born. Both birth and death make you take your eyes off the clock. Time comes to a standstill: the hands of the clock cease to move. For Savi it was the birth of her two children, for me, my mother’s dying. Two years when I did
nothing but watch her struggle to breathe, fearful that at any moment she would stop and it would be over. …Now time had begun moving once again for both of us (Deshpande Deceit.5)”

Shashi Deshpande in her novel In the Country of Deceit has highlighted the two important aspects of man-woman relationship i.e. sexual and psychological. The sexual aspect is more powerful than the psychological one. In sexual aspect Deshpande has shown pre-marital and extra marital relationship in her novel. Satisfaction, gratification of desire, fulfilment and not postponement, are some of the points which have also been highlighted by the novelist. Devayani expresses her core desire of love need to be fulfilled. She thinks, “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 Deceit.25)” . Her desire unfolding itself through the discourse, on the one hand through Devi’s experiences of her body and on the other through her aunt Sindhu’s letters in which she reveals her own life and experience and also comments on Devi’s experiences. Sindhu told her predicament and shares her experience with Devi through her letter and try to convince her for marriage. She writes that, “Life is lived through the body (Deshpande Deceit.41)” She continues “the body is important, and so are the demands of the body. …your natural desires will be with you for many more years (Deshpande Deceit.42)”

The narrator, Devayani, Mudhol, a woman almost twenty seven years of age, chooses to live alone in the small town 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 calm, fill with a hard-won independence. Then she meets Ashok Chinappa, Rajnur’s New District Superintendent of Police, and they fall in love despite the fact that Ashok is much older, married, and as both painfully acknowledge from the very beginning about the relationship without a future.

In our country most of the young ones marry in accordance the desire of elders and that is why they make acquaintance not through the mind but through the body but in the case of Devayani the situation is contrary, Ashok, the Superintendent of Police is already married person and the father of a ten years daughter and Devayani who is free from the boundation of family and loves Ashok without any hindrace of society but inspite of all these they could not be success in their mission because there are many factors which came in the way of their success.

Devayani falls in love with Ashok, a police officer who is not only older than Devayni but also a married man having his own ten years-old daughter but to keep all the perceptive restriction away from their path they suddenly embark on a passionate affair. Ashok develops a habit of calling her up in the middle of the night and engaging in a somewhat bizarre blend of heavy breathing and existentialist chat. On one of the occasion Devayani is dropped at her home in a car (Government vehicle) by Shivu, the driver of Ashok Chinappa When she had attended the party hosted by Rani. After reaching home when Devayani just began reading book, the phone rang:

“Hello? Did I wake you up? I identified the voice right away, No. Can’t sleep? No. Did I disturb you? He waited for my reply and when there was none, he said, “I am sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.” (Deshpande Deceit.52)

On one of another occasion when Rani and Devayani went to see the temple and in order to take some rest they sit on a platform under a Neem tree after some time when they started to walk the car they saw two men coming to them. They were Hussain and Ashok. Ashok requested them to come with him for breakfast at a bungalow. . They followed him to the bungalow and had
breakfast. After coming home she could not sleep and remained tossing all the time. At night Ashok rang Devayani up and did not tell his identity:

“Is this too late? Were you sleeping?” No. “What were you doing?” ‘Reading’. There was silence. ‘I thought you had something to say. You rang up’. He laughed. That’s better. Thank God you can say something besides “yes” and “no”. Yes, I rang up, but I only wanted to hear your voice. I made you speak in the morning just to hear you. Hello? Hello? ‘Yes, I’m here.’...Good night. Sleep well”. (Deshpande Deceit.76)

This is the first step of love which is too difficult for Devayani to forget. The words of Ashok remain in her mind which keeps her alive and creates a lust of sex. She remembers the moment spent with Ashok and the words said by him one by one. She is fully aware with the requirement of her body and came to know the meaning of marriage. She understood why the marriage is so important for the man and woman. She says:

“I lay in bed wide awake, conscious of my body in its nightdress, thinking, that’s the point of marriage. Sex without guilt. Sex without any strings attached. Sex without fear.” (Deshpande Deceit.77)

When she met Shivanna, the driver of Ashok Chinnpa, a few days later, she came to know that Ashok had gone to Bangalore and Mysore as his family is in Mysore. Devayani received an unbearable jerk as why he had not told her about his family. Many questions raised in the mind of Devayani as was Ashok flirting with her, but she could not find answer for the questions. When she was at dinner at Rani’s house Ashok comes there and has dinner with them. As soon as Devayani started to leave, Rani asks her to go with Hussain but in the mean time Ashok intercepts and says not to be worried, he will drop Devayani and lift her in his car. When he boarded the car Devayani was acutely conscious of his physical presence in the confined space of the car. Now there was pin drop silence in the car. Devayani was cursing herself for the lack of her communication skills as she did not know how to talk in a better way. As soon as she gets ready to get down Ashok requests her not to go as he wants to say something to her. What he said in his statement is mentioned here:

I’m a married man. I have a daughter, she’s nine, no, she’ll be ten this year. I don’t know your age, but I know you are much younger …” He paused and then burst out, ‘I can promise you nothing. Nothing.’ He paused again. ‘I know I have no right to say any of this to you, I know this is very wrong. I’ve tried not to, I’ve tried to control myself, but …let me say this just once, just this once.” (Deshpande Deceit.91)

She excuses him as she thinks that he loves her to the core and once again begins this all. His gentle hand on her lap seems to her as a balm. He also told her that he can promise her love and honesty. He puts shower of kisses on her. His affection makes her tension free. He said come and took her into the room. A melodrama of love making and quenching the thirst of sex is started in that isolated room. Devayani self expresses this in this way:

“He made me sit on the bed and released my hair, running his hands through it. He also murmured that ‘I’ve wanted to do this since the day I saw you,’ He tried to take my sari off my shoulder, but couldn’t. There’s a pin,’ I said and began to remove it, but he wouldn’t let me. He carefully unpinned the sari and began unraveling it from my body. While he undressed me, he murmured, words I could not understand, words that caressed me the way his hands did. I let him go on, saying nothing, listening to his murmurs, felling his hands, his fingers, his lips on my face, my body. And then, suddenly the hands became impatient and my body shrank from him, it went rigid with fear, for a moment I was back in my nightmare. He stopped abruptly. ‘I’m sorry, I…’ “It’s all right,’’ I said, it’s all
right…. 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 Deceit.132)

Savi, her sister who opposes it but Devi ignores and gets what she longs for i.e. the physical desire and its gratification through sex/sexual love. Her feeling ranges from pleasure and passion, even lust, to joy, bliss and ecstasy. Sindhu who, early in the novel, uses the Sanskrit word Ananda for ecstasy, linking it, as the Upanishads do, to the generating organ as the centre of all pleasures. Considering the range of experiences that have come to her, Devi says:

Nobody, but nobody has the words for what sex with your beloved is like. It’s the same with music. You have to hear it, you can’t describe it. “You want sex,” Savi (her sister) had said, crudely, savagely, deliberately trying to shock me. … Bliss. And he could give it to me with a touch, with a wod. It was this man, not the sex. This man’s love, not the sex. And yet, the sex too. (Deshpande Deceit.193)”

Rani’s mind is quietly preoccupied with memories of her film career as she thinks Devayani a wonderful character; smart, considerate, and formidably demure. Devayani had been the accompanist to other people’s lives but her own life is still alienated. As she contemplates that first she had a follower of her spirited, beautiful older sister, then in charge of parents’ lives and for a brief while she had acted for her cousin Kshama’s helper and later she had been Sindhu’s attendant after surgery. Now, for the first time, she had to play solo. She had no one else to look after, no one to think about.

Shashi Deshpande has an extraordinary skill in portraying inner psychology to build a tale of beauty rather than cheating. Promises of a durable relation are neither made nor expected. In being together, the lovers find tenderness and understanding; apart, they do not exist in each other's functional world. Their ecstasy outweighs the pain of separation. The novel exquisitely captures fragile relations. Adultery is an ugly word that has been stripped of its ugliness. The novel signals to a larger entity but Shashi Deshpande doesn’t think of it as big or small. She knows that love is a basic and universal human emotion. So is the pain that comes on betrayal. She finds it a problem that divides novels into big and small.

It is easy to go in but tough to come out. Generally love is considered to be simple but really it is very complicated. The novel tells about the beauty, simplicity but also complication of love. For Devayani, her meeting with Ashok is natural, beautiful and yet very mysterious. Who can reveal the mystery of love? Devayani welcomes Ashok as a reality of her life, to enjoy the body of Ashok and her own body. For her, it is more that sex, she deserves to enjoy the beauty, sacredness, and sweet taste of love. She walks on the wild side with her relationship with Ashok and that is the pivot of the story. She also realizes that her love with Ashok is temporary and in the end the novel peters out to an expected end without much bother. She has to come to a bitter decision to be apart from him. However wrong she has gone with Ashok, she keeps him in her memory:

"pictures will remain intact in my memory. Pictures of Ashok's face looking at me, loving, wanting, enjoying me, Ashok kneeling before me, his face humble, supplicating, Ashok on the beach, holding out his arms out to me, Ashok folding me in his arms Must I forget his tenderness, the gentleness of his touch, the urgency of his passion. No, I don't want to forget, I want to remember; it is not remembering but forgetting that will be my greatest enemy. It is what my life is going to be like from now on - a constant struggle between trying to forget and wanting to remember? (Deshpande. Deceit 258-259)"
Normally when people are separated in love, they will try to forget, but Devayani tries hard not to forget. The novel does not tell us about Devayani and Ashok, but includes other problems and people like Sindhu, Shree and Kshama who appear in their letters that build the novel into a beautiful and memorable experience. When Shashi Deshpande was asked, “Is the quality of love different in adolescent, youth and maturity?” She replied that:

“It is very difficult to distinguish love according to the level of mental maturity. A sixty years-old man or a woman can fall in love and behave like a child. People realize the true meaning of love only when they fall in love. My novel is about adult love. 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 (4)”

Ashok Chinappa is in a highly visible post in this small town where everyone knows everyone else; Devayani is unmarried and lives alone. Yet there is a desperate madness in their relationship. They meet furtively but repeatedly: in the car, in a friend’s house, even in her house one rainy night. Devayani feels that there is something sordid about meeting like this; but she cannot end it as both painfully acknowledge from the very beginning older - it is a relationship without a future. She says silently in response to admonishments from her family. “There are no boundaries for love (Deshpande Deceit 199)”

According to Deshpande relationships are not something one decides on. They happen naturally, especially adult relationships, and one must know what the consequences are and take responsibility for it. 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. Love and relationships stir the storyteller in her. Deshpande tells about the relationship in her new novel In the Country of Deceit which has just got the familiarity:

“All my books are about relationships - particularly the new one, which is about love between an adult man and an adult woman. Most of my novels emphasize love because I am fascinated by the idea of love. Devyani, the protagonist of my new book “In the Country of Deceit” , falls deeply and passionately in love. (5)”

Rumina Sethi says that Shashi Deshpande in her novels has described about the world of ordinary woman. These are women who live a humdrum existence, mainly jobless, surrounded by children. She highlights her views:

“What struck me repeatedly while reading In the Country of Deceit was the enormous line Shashi Deshpande has with Jane Austen. Both writers come from a completely different space and time but that little phrase I learnt in college while studying Austen has strangely remained in my memory: “little bit of ivory, two inches wide”. It seems appropriate in describing Deshpande’s world too. For, Deshpande’s novels are about the ordinary lives of women, too ordinary I might add (6)”

Devayani becomes Ashok’s mistress-his “girl”- and begins her long journey of “remorse” in the “country of deceit”. Ashok is the stock Mills-and-Boon hero, tough but tender, whom Devayani typically resists but soon he becomes her sun, moon and stars. He visits her surreptitiously and showers her with love and passionate embraces, but Devayani does not want to play the role of a whore or a floozy. She blurts out: “I must stop this. We can’t go on. We must stop. I will stop, I won’t go on with this, I must tell Ashok I can’t go on, I will tell him it’s over.” (Deshpande Deceit 162).

This is an example of the tormented sound of a woman in love with another woman’s husband. Torment will be torment in both literature and in commercial cinema, but somehow one expects interpretation in literature to belong to another plane. The efforts Devayani’s sister and
brother-in-law to recover the “Devi (they) know”, urging her to choose between a clandestine affair and the respectable option seem to be useless. They expound her that she can have loyalty only through an honourable marriage. How can she expect a man who is disloyal to his wife and his marriage to be loyal to her? Devayani’s relationship with Ashok pulls her out of the warm circle of love given to her in kind doses by her aunts, uncles and siblings which becomes conditional once they discover her wrongdoing.

A bourgeois world of moral and ethical values in which Devayani has to distinguish between right and wrong is exposed. Ultimately, she has to break off the relation with Ashok but it is not clear whether it is a result of feeling shameful or because he does not tell her that he has been posted out of Rajnur. The narrator tells of her love story only on the last but one page of the novel when Devayani faces the reality of life and “remorse” on what she had done without the consent of the family members:

"Why did I do it? Why did I enter the country of deceit? What took me into it? I hesitate to use the word love, but what other word is there? And yet, like the word atonement I kept hearing in Kashma’s conversation. Though she never uttered it, the word love is too simple for the complicated emotions and responses that made me do what I had done. Ultimately, I did it because he was Ashok, because we met. That's all. Our meeting—it was a miracle, a disaster (Deshpande. Deceit.257)"

In the Country of Deceit it is mainly through letters that Devi is compelled to take her own decisions by reconsidering her situation, it is these two voices, Devi’s and Sindhu’s, that contribute to the charm of the novel: “What does your Jane Austen say? (Deshpande. Deceit .27)” Indeed, what would Austen have said about a woman who so determinedly grasps her share of bliss? In her time, as Devi points out, there were only two options: marriage or spinsterhood, and she would have more than blushed, though not lightened, at Devi’s daring act of self-fulfilment. Self-determination, however, truth to oneself, was supreme for Austen. And this she might have respected, had she lived to see more of the world. When all is said, and no more left to be done, Devi sums up: “I too had a moment, a very brief moment, when I raised my arms and my fingertips brushed the sky (Deshpande Deceit.259)”. It brings back to her initial desire. It is roused by a scene she has witnessed earlier, after a football match, when a man raised his arms high above his head in triumph. The man is Ashok, who will eventually become her lover.

If love is sign of progress, then the ‘deceit’ ultimately causes the “Remorse”. Ashok is a married man, and again it is Sindhu, writing from her daughter’s home in the US, who points out and admits in her letter to Devayani that body is important and so are the demands of the body. She exhorts Devayani for marrying as she is young; her natural desire will be with her and also tells about the redundant costumes in patriarchal society particularly in India and says that “Our country does not allow women to fulfil these desires without marriage (Deshpande. Deceit.42-43)"

Sindhu had in fact just met a man she thinks might be a suitable boy for her niece, and her husband, reminding Devi of her favourite author, Jane Austen, bells in: Doesn’t every heroine get married at the end of the story? (Deshpande Deceit.27)” Devi is not convinced as she says, “I know that Jane Austen believed in marriage, that her heroines got their men at the end. But she believed in marriage with the right person. Why did she remain a spinster otherwise? (Deshpande Deceit.28)”

So Devi embarks on her relationship with a married man, undergoing, in due course, all the guilt and “remorse” to be expected from an innocent. Just as desire is spelt out in so many ways, so is deceit, the country of deceit being ‘our country’ just as much as that hidden, secret space that
Devi now inhabits. While, though rare, Devi’s gratification of desire is not singular, deceit is universal, ranging from various forms of betrayal to adultery, but also from infidelity to treachery and fraud. It is the desire of love for quenching the thirst of sex seeks the opportunity resulting the ‘remorse’. Nearly every other figure, and certainly the sub-plot around Rani, could tell a story of adultery (remember Sindhu’s early warning about sex out of wedlock). This kind of deceit is everywhere, in every class and segment of society, a constant reminder that it is most of the time women and families who suffer from it, that bliss is purchased at a high cost and that it will not last. *In the Country of Deceit* ends on a question mark which Devi puts: “Is this what my life is going to be like from now- a constant struggle between trying to forget and wanting to remember? (Deshpande Deceit.259)

Shashi Deshpande in this novel presents the intersection of varying lifestyles, presenting at the end their common condemnation of a universal crime beyond redemption and, one is left wondering- is it the crime of Love or that of Deceit? But love, more often out of than in wedlock, has been a topic in Deshpande’s writing from its very beginning, though it has not been scrutinised to the extent *In the Country of Deceit* does. Love in all its stimulating as well as its distasteful facets, has been in the centre of so many Indian novels since many time. In Deshpande it is part of a quest. Devi is one of Deshpande’s modern women trying to come to terms with themselves and their place in family and society; trying to reconcile their individual freedom to that of their ‘given’, which is not simply ‘culture’ or ‘society’ or class/caste, but also the freedom of others. All her figures reach their moment of epiphany that sets them on their arduous track towards crisis and resolution.

Brute force and great tenderness, here, are two aspects in a man who knows himself, who knows how little he fits into Devi’s world, and who yet is the only one to give her the “complicated emotions and responses that (make her) do what (she) had done … Our meeting – it was a miracle, a disaster (Deshpande. Deceit.257). In the milieu of the altering world we live in, it has become imperative to do away with separate domains for woman and man and to redefine man-woman relationship as equal and complementary and not on terms of domination and subordination.

**Works Cited:**


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