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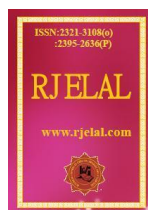
Redefining Womanhood: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Abstract

In *A Matter of Time* Shashi Deshpande deals with the inner world of Indian women. The paper attempts to explore the psycho-socio-philosophical turmoil that permeates in four consecutive generations - Manorama and Vithalrao, Kalyani and Shripati, Sumi and Gopal and Aru, Charu and Seema. Published in 1996, the novel revolves round the problem created by one man's decision to quit his householder's life and 'sanyas'. But actually, it is the story of the suffering of women left to fend for themselves who bear the brunt of the man's decision. That the women suffer is made clear by a casual but searing remark of Sumi, "You know Ramesh...what Gopal has really done is to take Sanyas.... But look what's happened-it's not he who's going around with the begging bowl, it's I who am doing that" (123). What is striking is that while man (the male) is free to follow the path of autonomy and individuation, a woman (the female) is tied down to responsibilities both, morally as well as psychologically. Both the plot and the sub-plot of the novel provide a pointer to this socio-cultural construct. Women are expected to be tolerant and accepting since the traits assigned to women are empathy, affiliation and responsibility towards family and others. It is this one-sided value-based behaviour that draws the attention of Shashi Deshpande and she subtly allows her characters to resist it. The analysis of the novel reveals how Sumi and her daughters exhibit different modes of resistance as per their individual psychology and the exigency of the plot to live their lives without any external pressures.

Keywords: Desertion, husband, society, daughters, resistance, acceptance, self, happiness.

INTRODUCTION

Man-woman relationship-the most sacred and the most cherished one in India – has

had its roots in the ancient holy concept of 'Ardha-narishwara' – the 'Shiva-Shakti' bond'. Man and his spouse are not understood to be two separate beings, holding their existence in

the world; they are supposed to be one in soul though two in bodies. Woman in Indian society has always held an upper place in comparison to man. Even the scriptures have declared: Atrā naryastu puṇyante, Ramante tatra devatah.

According to the ancient concept, woman is the mother, the divine principle 'Shakti', the inspiring and guiding source for man. Many writers have freely depicted her along these lines. Raja Rao while describing woman writes:

Woman is the earth, ether sound; woman is the microcosm of the mind, the articulation of space, the knowing in knowledge; the woman is fire, movement clear and rapid as the mountain stream; the woman is that which seeks against that which is sought. To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, to Krishna she is Radha. Woman is the meaning of the word, the breath, touch, act; woman, that which reminds man of that which he is, and reminds herself through him of that which she is. Woman is kingdom, solitude, time; woman is growth, the gods, inherence; the woman is death, for it is through woman that one is born; woman rules, for it is she, the universe (352).

Despite this fact there have been innumerable instances of her being treated as property or 'low possession' and so-called 'other-half'. Himself begotten of woman, man forgets his actual source. In the paper under study an analysis is made of the apathy of one such man who abandons his family without even once thinking the repercussion of such reckless decision. His abandonment begins the mental turmoil which his wife, three daughters and mother-in-law experience.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Unhesitatingly it is accepted that women writers have added a new dimension to the post-colonial Indian English fiction. Women writers contributed much to the development of

the English novels including new themes which resulted in a full scenario of female world. Their feminine sensibility made them capable to break a new ground in Indian English fiction making an approach from the external to the internal world. They created their own world filled with extraordinary sensitive beings. Women writers of Indian English fiction endeavoured a lot to exhibit the eternal quest of their female characters for a meaningful life. The journey of Indian English women novelists gradually reached such a destination where arose the concept of a 'changed woman' out of her viewpoint towards man, society and life. The term 'changed woman' is used for self-awakening of woman and for realization of her place and position in the orbit of her family and then in the society. The 'changed woman' in postcolonial Indian English fiction is conscious of her individuality and has been trying to confirm her rights as human being. She seems to be in constant fight for equality to man. Since long, silent suffering and upholding of Indian cultural values have been glorified in Indian fiction. Woman is designed to perform varied roles in her life-the role of a mother, a wife, a sister or a daughter, etc. but never she has been thought as an individual far from being merely a cog in the family machine. She is deprived of her own identity or aspiration for self-fulfillment. In the male dominated patriarchal society, she is pushed behind to the secondary position where all authorities are concentrated to the eldest male member of the family. They are just to obey and are neglected to shrink to be a timid and helpless creature. The phenomenon of male domination resulted in a cry of protest.

Woman began to cry under the stress of physical, mental and spiritual crises. Woman began to break the ice of restrictions and struggled to set herself free from the shackles of traditional position. She felt the need to seek her own identity, to determine her position in the scheme of family and society. She ceased to feel pride in her glorification as the model of selfless service and giver of love and affection. She

seemed to stop her presentation on the line of Sita, Savitri or Ansuaya.

The process of woman's emergence in a new form with new thoughts and ideas took place gradually. The British intention to impart English education to the Indians proved a boon in disguise. In fact Indian writers in colonial period were writing with a purpose. But in post-colonial period too the trend remained the same and the clay was moulded by the hands of many Indian English writers before it took the shape of a 'new woman'. In the postcolonial period woman's liberation from the bondage of ignorance and her time-honoured expected role heralded a dawn of independence especially in the works of woman novelists. Her thirst for recognition was awakened. Consequently, there arose the problem of adjustment between old cultural values and self-fulfilment which led to a kind of frustration to some extent.

The 'changed woman' resents to be put under the oppressive restriction. Her education and economic independence brought tremendous change in her outlook on conjugal relationship and her attitude towards love, marriage and sex. Though a few examples of woman's feeble protest and deviation from the accepted norms can be traced in the novel written by men writers for instance the characters of Savitri in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* and Rosie in *The Guide* and that of Gauri in Mulk Raj Anand's *Gauri*. In Indian English fiction the woman made her appearance in flesh and blood in the novels of women writers only. Woman novelists writing in English in postcolonial period projected woman in the lead role. They revealed changed image of woman in the family and society. The women novelists have a deeper probing into woman's psyche, her perplexity, her responses and reactions. Women novelists are appreciable claimants for portraying a life-size picture of woman with all her aspirations, hopes and frustrations.

Among the woman novelists writing in English in post-colonial period, Kamala

Markanadaya, Anita Desai, Ruth Prewar Jhabwala, Nayantara Sahgal, Namita Gokhale, Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpandae etc. are prominent to put woman in central position with all sensibility in the fictional world. Whereas other women writers explored other fields of feminine world, Shashi Deshpandae involved herself in presenting the inner world of her hypersensitive individuals. She ushered in the psychological novels and got excellence in this particular field. The main protagonist Sumi and her three daughters redefine womanhood by bravely accepting the stark reality of their lives and emerging 'awakened' and 'changed women'.

Desertion

A Matter of Time is a chronicle of three generations of women-Kalyani, Sumi and Aru. As the novel opens, we find Gopal, main protagonist Sumi's husband, deserting his family for no apparent reason. His abandonment begins the mental turmoil which his wife, his three daughters and his mother-in-law experience. His sudden decision to break the family ties comes as a bolt from the blue and leaves everyone shaken. Sumi bears this shock almost stoically and breaks this news to her daughters. She seems to have remained unperturbed by Gopal's desertion, "She answers all their repeated questions with infinite patience, she listens to their repeated exclamations with what looks like composure, there are no signs of irritation or annoyance" (10). The true essence of a changed woman or the basic qualities that suggests heroism in a person are firmness and patience. Both these qualities go hand in hand as firmness suggests steadiness and patience help one to stay rooted and sustain one's self. Sumi exhibits these qualities from the very beginning. The family is compelled to live with Sumi's parents in the absence of any financial support. They move to the Big House named Vishwas where Sumi's parents Kalyani and Shripati lead a disintegrated life. Gopal's desertion has turned everyone's life upside down. Sumi tries to look

unperturbed and calm but her mind is not at ease, "With Gopal's going, it was as if the swift-flowing stream of her being had grown thick and viscous- her movements, her thoughts, her very pulse and heartbeats seemed to have slowed down"(28). Gopal's absence has left emptiness within Sumi and she is clueless about which way to go. Though she and her daughters try to live a normal life, things cannot become as normal as they were. Sumi is aware of the change that has come over her daughter. She sees that despite the girls having resumed, on the surface at least, the normal course of their lives, something has changed. They have withdrawn into themselves, each pursuing her own activity, interacting minimally with each other. Aru's reserve has turned into secretiveness. She goes out a great deal, more than she did before, and it is obvious that this has nothing to do with college or her studies. In fact she has resigned from the Student's Council, something she had taken very seriously until now. Charu has become wholly single-minded and dogged, the intensity of her pursuit of a seat in a medical college frightening. Nothing else seems to exist for her, apart from her college, her evening classes and her books when she is at home. And though Seema, belying Sumi's fears, looks the most untouched, she keeps aloof from her mother and sisters, "following Kalyani about, even holding her sari-end, as if she is reverting to that early infancy she can't possibly remember. It makes Sumi uneasy" (59).

But gradually everything falls into place. The girls have apparently accepted their way of life as they are left with no choice. They settle into the routine without grief and fear. Sumi has also accepted this change in her circumstances. It is not that she is completely unaffected by the situation because the girls notice several changes in her like, "a purposeless extravagance about her movements, an exaggeration that is different from her normal vivacity and quickness" (33). But what sustains her is her positive outlook and her firmness which is the essence of a changed woman. Sumi and Gopal

had a love marriage and have led a happy, harmonious life that is based on mutual love and respect. While recounting their first union Gopal thinks, "And I knew then that early years of their marriage. The conjugal bliss that they enjoyed in early years of their marriage it was for this, this losing yourself in another human being that men give up their dreams of freedom"(223). He recounts the first pangs of love that he felt for Sumi. He remembers the sense of pure while making love to Sumi:

That night in Hegde's bachelor home, I drowned myself in Sumi. Ananda, Ananda— the word swung in my mind like a bell, it pealed and echoed in it. I repeated the words of the song to Sumi, worshipping her from head to toe and it was not sacrilege but an echo of the same supreme joy. I felt my being drown'in in hers, I was close to that great mystery, the otherness of my self. And I got it, a glimpse of the purest joy, the purest metal, untouched by any base alloy (89).

But this romantic interlude is an illusion of eroticism because while courting Sumi, Gopal has fears of not fulfilling his duties as a husband. When they decide to get married, Gopal proposes that if either of the two wants to be free, he or she will be left to go. They will not tie each other down. Sumi, who is very young at that time and very much in love, does not realize the gravity of this commitment. As she says, "And I agreed. I was only eighteen then and you were twenty-six....But it meant nothing to me then. How can you think of separating, of wanting to be apart, when you are eighteen and in love?... I thought we would always be together" (221). But gradually she becomes aware of the changes taking place in him. She tells him, "Then you began to move away from me. I knew exactly when it happened. And I knew I could not stop you. I could do nothing. When you left, I knew I would not question you. I would just let you go" (221).

Sumi exhibits exemplary courage and determination in allowing him to go without asking any questions or throwing any tantrum. Her poise makes the passage of his exit smooth. Her courteous behaviour and composure suggest munificent heroism. Her sympathy to the suffering of Gopal and relieving him from his misery, readiness for self-sacrifice. Her resolve to give the best to her daughters despite all the difficulties displays bellicose heroism. Her ardent zeal to do what is right at all costs is a heroism which is of righteous kind. Sumi knows and understands Gopal so well that she deems it fit not to trouble him by asking questions. She is also aware that if she had asked him the reason, she would not have received a proper answer. She recalls Gopal's words, "Destiny is just us, and therefore inescapable, because we can never escape ourselves. Certain actions are inevitable because we are what we are. In a sense, we walk on chalked lines drawn by our own selves" (26).

Nevertheless, she wants to ask him one question that remains unasked:

If I meet Gopal, I will ask him one question, just one, the question no one has thought of. What is it Gopal, I will ask him, that makes a man in this age of acquisition and possession walk out on his family and all that he owns? Because, and I remember this so clearly, it was you who said that we are shaped by the age we live in, by the society we are part of. How can you, in this age, a part of this society, turn your back on everything in your life? Will you be able to give an answer to this? (27).

Gopal, in his endeavour to find peace within himself, invites the wrath of his elder daughter Aru. Aru's actions evoke as she is more vocal in her protest. Her blood boils at the thought of what her father has done to them and completely disagrees with her mother. In a fit of anger, she visits her father thinking he would reveal his feelings to her but is unsuccessful in

her attempt. She wants to behave like an adult-cool and reasonable but hates herself for breaking down in front of Gopal. Therefore, "Aru goes home encompassed by a sense of humiliation. It is not merely the fact that she broke down before Gopal when she had determined to be in full control of herself; it is the recalling of how she had imagined it would be that mortifies her" (56). She does not want to let him go scot-free and wants to sue him and demand, maintenance from him. She is angry with her mother for letting things go so easily. As she tells her mother in no uncertain terms, "Sumi, you're making it too easy for him, you're letting him get away with it. He's getting off scot-free, it's not right, he must be made to realize what he's done..." (61).

Aru's impotent rage makes her suffer and withdraw from all of them. She avoids staying at home and when at home spends most of her time by herself in her room. In a fit of anger, she visits Surekha, a lawyer and explores the ways of punishing Gopal. She finds herself in a state of perplexity or flurry which is caused due to portentous phenomenon. She harbors bitterness towards all men and vehemently refuses to accept advances made by Rohit. Sumi is also worried about her perception as she thinks, "she has begun to see her mother as a victim, that, in fact, she has begun to see a victim in every woman, a betrayer in every man" (144).

Her resentment towards the treatment meted out to women and how they are suppressed in the name of tradition force her to join a women's activist group. She does not want to get hurt like her mother and grandmother. Her desire to become a lawyer and become independent is the outcome of her resentment towards their way of life. Sumi rejects the idea of asking for maintenance from Gopal. She bears the pain of desertion with grace and equanimity, "...the picture she presents to the worlds is one of grace and courage, to be admired rather than pitied" (172). Her indomitable spirit allows her not to indulge in self-pity or cursing or crying. Instead of agonizing over the situation and

indulging in blame game, she accepts her lot in a matter-of-fact way and decides to fight her own battle. As Shashi Deshpande observes,

Sumi's acceptance is not passive. She blocks out the unpleasantness. She has a good opinion of herself, she is more concerned with getting on with life. She does not want pity; she would do anything for pride. She distances even her husband. The point is, they are both unusual people. People are puzzled by the abandoned wife not feeling bad (Rau 131).

Redefining Self: The Changed Woman

In her decision to bury her past and begin life a fresh by firmness, heroism, dynamic energy, bravery, might and profound emotions Sumi refuses to accept financial assistance either from her parents or sister or from Ramesh, Gopal's nephew. Here pride should not be confused with boasting or vanity. It comes out a sense of achievement or accomplishment or believing in one's own abilities. Sumi displays a sense of pride in her convictions and her ability to cope with the situation with elegance. She decides to move into the uncharted territory displaying a changed woman. She finds a job, albeit a temporary one, as a teacher. Her effervescent self makes her realize her true potential. She also learns to ride two-wheeler and searches frantically for an independent house. As she learns to cope with the situation she thinks, "...retracing my steps, picking up things, thinking is this it? But she has turned resolutely away from even her immediate past, she is preparing herself for the future" (122). She learns to take everything in her stride, even reproach from women like Shankar's mother who holds her responsible for this crisis. She blames Sumi for abandoning her husband and says,

When are you going back to your husband?... You should be with him. Look at his state! It's all right to stay with your parents for a while, but that's not

your home.... Go back to your husband, he's a good man. If you've done wrong, he'll forgive you. And if he has -women shouldn't have any pride (161).

The words of Shankar's mother could have led to anger but instead Sumi wonders at the way women are perceived in society. It is enough for a woman to have her husband however incompatible they are because, "what is a woman without a husband?" (167). Jasbir Jain makes a very interesting and relevant point about marriage, "Marriage, home, the claims of the family are traditional goals set for the female child. It is only by examining and exploring the restrictive aspects of this value system that any change can be affected" (27).

Sumi's perception about her life is quite clear and she wants to proceed in that direction. Sumi's parents Kalyani and Shripati have not spoken to each other for more than thirty years. Kalyani's dominating mother Manorama forces her to marry her brother Shripati when she comes to know about some other boy's interest in Kalyani. Kalyani adheres to her mother's wish and is pushed into a loveless marriage. The marriage becomes a prison house for Kalyani when she loses her four old, mentally challenged son at a railway station. Shripati searches frantically for his son for nearly two months but to no avail. From that day he stops speaking to her as he blames her for the child's disappearance. The eerie silence that exists between them also affects their daughters Sumi and Premi. Sumi has come to terms with life and wants her daughters to enjoy life. As Urvashi Sinha and Gur Pyari Jandial rightly point out:

though, Sumi...remains tight-lipped after her husband Gopal deserts her, her silence is not the resigned silence of hopelessness that an abandoned wife is expected to adopt. Because she understands Gopal, she does not bear any grudges against him. She refuses to be silenced into a life of self-pity and aspires

to fulfil the dreams that lay dormant in her! (184).

Her concern is that the shadow of her own life should not fall on her daughters. She is worried about Aru's anger towards her father and hopes, "I want her to enjoy the good things in life" (220). It is at this time when everything has fallen into place and Sumi is jubilant about getting a job that things fall apart. Sumi and her father are going to the market on a scooter when they meet with an accident. Both of them die leaving everyone shocked. Just when Shripati starts opening up about his lost son Madhav, the accident brings an end to his chance of reconciliation with Kalyani. Aru has to don the mantle of the son of the family and lift the cross on her shoulder. She consoles Kalyani and arranges for the final journey of her mother and grandfather. "Rohit watching Aru from a distance, thinks she has the concentration of a rope-walker, holding the weight of her grief in her two hands, not as if it is a burden, but to balance herself" (234). Perhaps Sumi has passed on her legacy of high spiritedness to her. Aru is now ready to take the world with firmness, patience, heroism, generosity. When Gopal wants to leave all of them once again, she bids him adieu without any resentment. She portrays a brave front, decisiveness, not giving way to depression, not being surprised or confused. Aru is now a more mature person, fulfilling her promise to her grandmother, almost always by her side, accepting her father's desire to go and letting him go with a smile of encouragement on her face.

Shashi Deshpande does not merely portray a tear-soaked tale of suffering and endurance. It subtly shows the difference between the values ascribed to stereotypical male and female traits in which men's needs take precedence over women's depicting the many faces of female resistance that make survival in the hostile world possible. This is clear from the behaviour of two male characters- Shripati and Gopal. Both leave the domestic sphere because they cannot cope with life's

commitments. Gopal has an unexplained existential drive and he leaves everything behind, including a happy family, in his quest for the self. Shripati shuts himself up against all communication because of frustration, anger and despair. For him, nursing his suffering self is far more significant than caring for his wife. He forgets, rather he does not want to understand that the grief of having lost the son is not his alone. It is Kalyani's as well. By severing all ties, even speech with her, he is torturing her doubly. Thus, the two men— Shripati and Gopal—run away from life and evade their duties and responsibilities towards their families. The Bhagwat Gita upholds the principle of non-attachment but it does not advocate running away. The very basis of its tenets is action, as it exhorts Arjuna to face the battlefield. On this premise, let us have a look at the reality of Gopal and Sumi's life: Gopal leaves his family in the mid-years—his three daughters are in their teens (a difficult period for growing up adolescents), his wife Sumi is not employed in any job and is economically ill-equipped to face the day-to-day requirements, his in-laws, though economically sound, have their own problems. Did he ever give a thought to all these? The burden of his decision falls on Sumi, his three daughters and Kalyani. As Aru tells him, his going away thus has meant for them "the feeling of displacement, the questions and innuendoes they have to face, the sense of shame and disgrace" (62). But Gopal is an escapist who cannot accept the challenge that life is. He broods, after Aru has left him with searing questions— "Why did you marry? Why did you have children?" —that marriage makes demands and it is not possible for him to "tolerate a lifetime of commitment" (69).

Sumi, the strongest of all women in the novel, reflects a symbol of progress. She believes in herself and stands for responsibility, motherly care, love and concern. She also writes a play "The Gardener's Son" for the school function and rejoices its success. She tells Aru, "It feels so good, you can't imagine! I've been so

lazy all my life. And now suddenly I want to do so many things" (231). Aru notices the glow of happiness, of achievement on her mother's face and compares it with a diamond "sparkling in the sudden light" (231). The rainy night and the smell of wet earth connects Sumi to the truthfulness of life and death. "There's something primitive in us that rushes out to meet this fragrance of water and earth mingling, there's a promise of rebirth in it" (232). Sumi seems to have sensed her death. That same day she insists her father to be her pillion rider, unfortunately meets with an accident and both of them die on the spot. Gopal says that they are "Runamukta", free of all human debts. He believes that we are bound to our destinies, "that there is no point in struggling against them, even then this remains-that we do not submit passively or cravenly, but with dignity and strength. Surely, this, to some extent, frees us from our bonds?" (246). Paul Roubiczek believes:

Freedom exists for us in two forms which we could call, somewhat paradoxically, 'freedom of choice' and 'choice of freedom'. If we are free, we must be free to choose, but we can make either a choice which really sets us free or a wrong choice which enslaves us again. Freedom could perhaps be best defined as acting entirely by our own free will, but if we have not to be enslaved again, we must also be willing to act in accordance with our true nature, so that it can find its full expression; otherwise we shall find that we are forced into actions which violate that nature (122).

Gopal, who has selected freedom, observes the sense of duty and responsibility in P.K.'s, his brother-in-law's character. Gopal accepts that P.K. was "a man whose sense of duty and responsibility was absolute. And yet, after his death, when the crows would not come for the pindas, the priests said, "he must have left something undone" (45). But for Gopal the absolute knowledge was to attain peace through

isolating himself from any worldly attachment. He ponders over P.K.'s sense of responsibility by asking: "Is there to be no end after death? Was a man to be tied to his duties forever? Could he never be free?" (45).

For Sumi the absolute knowledge was to accept the challenges and to grow. Both Gopal and Sumi want to attain an equal absolute knowledge of foundations and the meanings of their existence. When Sumi dies Runamukta, Gopal leaves Kalyani and Aru. Will he be Runamukta as her after this unworldly act? He observes Sumi's life but has he ever observed or realized his duties towards his family? Can such sanyas or enlightenment be absolute or relative-a matter of convenience? Paul opines, "We have to pay attention to the limitations of any knowledge which we can possibly gain – that is, to the fact that there is no knowledge which is both comprehensive and absolute..." (139).

CONCLUSION

Shashi Deshpande has focused attention on the problems faced by women in the male-dominated, tradition-bound society, in her fiction: both novels and short stories. She does not claim to be a feminist writer but her central characters are usually educated, intelligent, middle-class, urban, career women who are familiar with the contemporary thoughts and trends. They face the challenges, concerns and choices of the educated, urban women and try to find a solution to the situation they are placed in. Theirs is the agonizing dilemma of the woman who has been exposed to the Western thought and yet who is conditioned by tradition. Though assertive, her protagonists are never radically militant, out to overthrow the social and familial order to flaunt their freedom. They resist the wrongs within the culturally determined space and gain their identity. Sumi is happy and contented towards the end of the novel having rediscovered herself.

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