



INDULGING IN AN INDIVIDUALISTIC PORTRAYAL OF THE FEMININE: BUILDING A BROADER PERSPECTIVE IN DESHPANDE'S *A MATTER OF TIME*

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ABSTRACT



Shashi Deshpande becomes one such writer in the writings of Indian Literature who writes to project the more individualistic and human side of women. The writer herself being a woman did resort to female protagonists to put forth her point of view, but still possessed a neutral outlook towards them. In catering to the myriad selves, which have been bestowed upon them because of the traditional Indian society, their real self remains under covers up till now. *A Matter of Time*, through its psychoanalytic and stream of consciousness explored certain unexplored areas in the psyche of the women, especially in the mind of the protagonist, Sumi. The paper wishes to embark on a quest to examine the self of Sumi, her aspirations and her relationship with her family. Amidst physical happenings the within is left uncatered. The writer takes up this initiative to lend a voice and to break free boundaries to bring forth a truthful portrayal of the feminine. Deshpande has been tag lined for long to be a feminist writer, though she denies being one. The writer through her writings has always brought out an independent self of her women protagonists who aren't influenced by any other external factors. She introduces a deep insightful journey within the 'inside' of a woman, to sort out certain dilemmas on the exterior front. During this process the protagonist achieves immense clarity of her stance with respect to her present day situation, which lends her clarity of her own predicament. Through this process of analysis of one's self, she takes charge of her present state and becomes victorious in taking responsibility of the actions which are not under her control and also of situations which could be mended only with the fate of acceptance. Thus, the paper is an attempt to understand the genuineness and the honesty in the depiction of a woman's life and also to catch a glimpse of her very own self, which too waits to let herself breathe.

Key Words: Self, psychoanalytic, individual, human, breathe, dilemma.

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Women's writing has traversed a long journey from a self tortured process to a self identification process. Women's writing has been a venture in to the pathway of truth and a deep

exploration within the psyche of an individual, to fathom the depth of thought processing within them. What makes such writing stand apart and with an exclusive tag, is mainly because of the

extraordinary insight which one gains upon venturing into the mind of the female.

Shashi Deshpande, the winner of the Sahitya Academy Award has successfully portrayed contemporary, well-educated, career-conscious middle class woman who are insightful to the changing era and circumstances. She reveals a remarkable insight into a woman's psyche by representing woman in different roles- daughter, wife, mother and an individual who seeks her gender identity. Shashi Deshpande contributes by depicting the problems and plights, trials and tribulations of the middle class women of Indian society. She does not give her female protagonists a readymade solution for their problems but develops a faith in hope so that they can change their circumstances from despair to hope through a route of self-searching and self-examination, through valor and resilience. The identity crisis which is initially developed and resolved towards the end forms the thread line and the basic structure of her novels. The silence in the novels does not speak of their subjugated selves but instead of their process in meeting their hidden identity. Truly, Shashi Deshpande has been successful enough in reaching a unified conclusion after a fragmentary start, their self alienation leads to self identification.

A Matter of Time successfully reveals the secrets and strength of women as well as the complications of family and culture. The background of the novel reflects South Indian culture, landscape, folk tales and history. Deshpande gives an honest account of the abrupt disintegration of Gopal's happy family and the diverse reaction of all the people concerned. Without any prior indication, Gopal, the respected Professor, devoted husband and caring father, announces to his wife that he is leaving the house for good after twenty years of marriage.

The story comprises four generations of women of a middle class family. Deshpande's perspective of marriage is elaborated through these four different generations : Manorama, an uneducated woman representing the first generation; Kalyani, the grandmother, who is not really educated; Sumi who is educated but has not worked outside home; Aru, Charu and Seema, who

all aspire for independence and careers. Vithalrao, Kalyani's father, never grudging the birth of Kalyani. Manorama wanted to have a son. But for Vithalrao, it made no difference whether he had a son or a daughter. He was an educated man for whom the patriarchal values and ideals had little value. He was not like any other traditional father who put restrictions on his daughter and allowed Kalyani to pursue her education. He wanted Kalyani to become an engineer. But Manorama was tormented by the fear that Vithalrao might marry again to have a son. She very well knew that a husband is traditionally allowed to leave his wife if she can not give birth to a male heir. This fear affected her whole life and she could not establish a healthy relationship with her daughter, Kalyani. Moreover, Kalyani was average in looks and this led to disappointment to Manorama. She wanted Kalyani to be beautiful so that she could find a better match for her. In fact, a girl's appearance is given much importance by society as it is an pivotal consideration in match-making. A boy's interest in Kalyani infuriated Manorama and so eventually she did not allow Kalyani to complete her studies. Moreover, in order to prevent the property from going away to another family, her mother got Kalyani married to Shripati, Manorama's youngest brother. She forced Shripati to marry Kalyani by appealing to his sense of gratitude to her. So, Kalyani was married to her uncle for monetary purpose as Deshpande states in the novel:

"Perhaps, after this, Manorama felt secure. The property would remain in the family now. Her family."(Deshpande, *A Matter of Time* 43)

Through the portrayal of the second generation pair, Kalyani and Shripati, the writer depicts the predicament of women who are confined in the framework of traditional marriage and lead a life of self-denial and suffering. Kalyani's life is an example of forced incompatible arranged marriage in which a woman has to suffer endlessly. She has to accept her uncle as a husband in order to prevent the property from going away in the hands of others. This is the main reason of

“the hopelessness that lay within the relationship, that doomed it from the start”. (Deshpande, *A Matter* 143)

Manorama’s bitter attitude towards Kalyani gets soft when Kalyani gives birth to a son. But this child turns out to be mentally retarded. Kalyani loses this child at the railway station while going to her parental home. With this, her married life comes to an end. She is never forgiven by her husband for being responsible for the loss of her male child. She has to suffer because of the loss of her male child and the ruthless withdrawal of her husband thereafter. Kalyani returns home as a deserted wife. Shripati comes back after two months, but he never speaks to Kalyani. They live like strangers under the same roof. She considers her situation better than widows. Sumi, her daughter, questions this kind of existence:

“Is it enough to have a husband, and never mind the fact that he has not looked at your face for years, never mind the fact that he has not spoken to you for decades? Does this wifehood make up for everything, for the deprivation of a man’s love ...” (Deshpande, *A Matter* 128)

Kalyani finds herself in a situation in which she has no choice but to accept the pain of loneliness. The lack of communication between Shripati and Kalyani raises various issues related to matrimony. In spite of all this, Kalyani does not turn bitter to other family members, rather she becomes the support for the rest of the family. She brings up her daughters alone. She fears a similar fate to her daughter, Sumi. Her fears are based on the patriarchal oppression in the framework of marriage where a woman has to suffer silently. She is made to realize that she has lost her right as a wife by losing her son. She becomes very upset when she comes to know about Gopal’s decision of leaving Sumi. She never wants that her daughter should suffer like her. She cries,

“No, ... no, my God, not again”.
(Deshpande, *A Matter* 123)

She goes to Gopal and takes the entire responsibility of Sumi’s carelessness, if any, on herself. In spite of her own bitter experiences of marriage, Kalyani does not turn pessimistic. She has

a very bright and optimistic attitude towards life. She is very enthusiastic about getting a good match for Aru, her grand daughter. With Shripati’s death, Kalyani’s hope of reconciliation and her hopeless marriage both come to an end. Though Shripati had no feelings for her, she cries bitterly after his death.

Sumi is shown as the epitome of silent suffering and passive resistance. She has a remarkable capacity of endurance. When Gopal leaves her abruptly, she even does not ask for an explanation. In fact, Sumi’s marriage is an example of love marriage. Before their marriage, Sumi and Gopal had decided that if either of the two wanted to be free, he or she would be allowed to move away from the boundaries of marriage. Sumi’s early marital life was full of happiness and their relationship was based on love and mutual understanding. It was considered an ideal marriage by all. Gopal did everything that a husband should do—caring the babies, tending them and caressing them with joy. It is strange for all that he walks out on his wife and children, but Gopal feels some inner emptiness because of which he deserts all this. Sumi takes his decision with resignation and moves towards achieving an independent identity. She is so self-controlled that she never talks about Gopal. She understands that they cannot get along. She meets him after this, not deliberately but accidentally, only for a brief while. No doubt, Sumi is hurt but she does not crumble to pieces. Sumi faces the trauma of a deserted wife and the anguish of an isolated partner. Sumi gets a job and decides to go to Devgiri. Aru is shattered when she comes to know about it, but Sumi says,

“Be happy for me, Aru. This is the first thing in my life I think that I’ve got for myself”.
(Deshpande, *A Matter* 123)

Sumi dies just before she is about to begin a new life. Aru is going to be a lawyer and Charu is on her way to become a doctor. They are pursued by two capable young men—Rohit and Hrishi. The novel ends not on Sumi’s death, but on Aru and Kalyani standing together to face the life with the hope of betterment.

Sumi, the main protagonist in the novel, becomes a stoic example of a powerful, independent, self sufficient, family woman who

realizes the zeal within herself to fend for herself. When Gopal out of the blue expresses his need to walk away from the family, Sumi never gets it on the surface, the pangs of being left all alone, suddenly.

If I meet Gopal I will ask him one question...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 it was you who said we are shaped by the age we live in, by the society we are part of. How then can you, in this age, a part of this society, turn your back on everything in your life? Will you be able to give me answer to this? (27)

As Gowri Sivaraman opines,

“What emerges from Shashi Deshpande’s writing is precisely this point that men try and give up easily and go on to fresh fields but women stay and fight on and do merge victorious after most battles. They may be weak and may even be oppressed. But they have the will power to rise up like a phoenix out of this Ashes.”(118)

Sumi in the novel expresses her predicament regarding the instance of Gopal abandoning family life over personal life.

“All these days I have been thinking of him as if he has been suspended in space, in nothingness, since he left us. But he has gone on living, his life has moved on, it will go on without me. So has mine. Our lives have diverged, they now move separately, two different streams.”(85)

Through different women Shashi Deshpande gets to the readers in being very practical when dealing with life. Gopal in a fit of a second feels a sense of non belongingness when dealing with family life, and decides to leave it in order to cater to his own living. Deshpande has uplifted the writings of women to a higher pedestal by focusing on the higher predicament involved when dealing with lives of women in general. As S. Prasanna Sree substantiates this statement,

“Modern and liberal in outlook, Sumi defies the outdated social opinion and orthodox treatment of a woman subjected to desertion by her husband. She has the

courage to rise above the consequential problems and difficulties, humiliations and frustrations.(118)”

The need of the hour is to be a lion in the midst of the world, than seeking for peace and atonement in being aloof. Sumi demonstrates the real human who is fighting her existentialist angst by being a part of life. Deshpande has also shown one approach of existentialism by showing us to escape routes for life. One was through Gopal, who abandoned a physical life for he found no meaning and sense of belongingness in leading this life and the second escape route was through the death of Sumi. She and her father die on the same day, when Sumi had actually solved all dilemmas of the within and had taken an acceptance of her estrangement with Gopal. Her death happens when she gains control of all events which did not serve a meaning then. Thus, the writer shows the current phenomenon of existentialism which has followed up every individual in this post modern era. The answers to the problems might not be present on the exterior but lies within the problem itself.

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