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Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* as an Exploration of a Woman's Inner Life

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Abstract

Deshpande believes that she is a feminist and her concerns are universal. Women are caught in the process of redefining and rediscovering their own roles, position and relationship within their given social world. In the extended generation, the modern Indian womanhood focusing on women's issues, problems and experience is equally symptomatic of the resistance to feminist expression. The inner life of woman emotionally isolated from her family is reflected and refracted in the embryonic woman represented by her daughters without any explanation in the novel *A Matter of Time*.

Keywords

Shashi Deshpande; *A Matter of Time*; Woman's Inner Life.

Ever since the dawn of civilization, there has been a struggle to liberate women from male oppression. Feminism is an expression of resentment at the treatment meted out to any woman. In literature, it refers to any mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for female experience. The inequalities against which the feminists have raised their voice of protest – socio-cultural, religious, legal and economic restrictions on the basic rights of woman – have existed throughout history across the world in all the civilizations. Naturally, the principle of feminism was articulated much earlier and its roots can be traced in the history of civilization.

Shashi Deshpande's writing is gender specific. Feminism is at the core of her novels. She deals with a woman's psyche and the way she is made to feel as an inferior being, an unwanted child, a burden on the family for instance. Mother-daughter relationship has an important place in her novels. Marginalized men and silent women are depicted in *A Matter of Time*. It is a contribution of her exploration into the many facets of feminine experience in writing. It is a story encompassing three generations of women coming to terms with their life in an all-female world. The relation of women characters share with their men is hovered with silence, absence or indifference.

A Matter of Time is the first novel of Shashi Deshpande to be published in New York and has an afterword by Indian feminist editor and publisher Ritu Menon, which helped non-native readers appreciate the novel. Shashi Deshpande evinces keen interest in the empowerment of women in the multifaceted aspects of life. She tries to project the fact that a woman speaking for her or for the whole of womankind is quite different from a man telling a woman's tale. This paper tries to bring out this idea of woman explicating herself and emerging out the cocoon of self-pity to spread her wings of self-confidence as a whole produces the individual described as a female.

A Matter of Time deals with the theme of the quest for a female identity. The complexities of man-woman relationship, especially in the context of

marriage, the trauma of a disturbed adolescence, the attempt to break traditional moulds in which women are trapped, sexual-discrimination, the rejection of the dependency syndrome and introspection are some of the concerns which give the novel a feminist bent.

The absence of Gopal from his family walls out his wife Sumi and his three daughters. This is set against the backdrop of the sad tale of Kalyani and Shripati in the Big House. Gopal's absence creates a unique tension because various characters (Aru, Saru and Seema) found out the conjugal relationship between them as Kalyani's daughter Sumi. History repeated itself in the life of Sumi. But on both occasions Kalyani and Sumi are silent. Kalyani's silence is made to realize her motherhood as well as her right as a wife. Her punishment is that she has to live with this psychic wound. The punishment is that the woman's body is not only a text of culture, but a focus of social control and the site of violence, exclusion and abuse. In this social construction she is compelled to accept her passivity. For nearly thirty five years, she remains a second sex and a passive silent sufferer. Her body becomes a site of colonizing power.

In Sumi's life, there is a vacuum because of Gopal's abandonment. Sumi found out his probable motives from his past acts and utterances. Gopal accepts the traditional Hindu view of marriage where God unites both the hearts. He also believes that the husband and wife are described as two halves of one being. But he realizes that he was failing the idealistic expectations of his marriage.

In the maze of family history, nothing happened in Sumi and her daughter's life because no solution is found to their problem. Everyone because of Sumi and Shripati are killed in an accident. The big house watches one more generation go down in history and one generation writhe under the impact of relentless fate.

Sumi's daughter Aru is a rebel. She rebels against her father Gopal. Aru asks Gopal why did he get married and had children at all. Her searching question makes Gopal re-examine his motives and his feelings for the family. Out of disappointment and frustration, Aru declares that she would never get married. She holds a strong view against patriarchy as women in general, get victimized as a result of the actions of men.

Shashi Deshpande throws some light on women's education and liberation. On the whole novel is devoted to silent women, unhappy, yet lively, clinging to their past, yet living in the present. Shashi Deshpande is interested in the exploration of the human relationships of middle class women. Deshpande places the failed marriage of Sumi and Gopal firmly at the center of the novel and it is juxtaposed with other marriages: Kalyani and Shripati; Manorama and Vithalrao; Goda and Satyanarayanan; Premi and Anil; Devaki and Vasudev Murthy; Ramesh and Chitra; and Sudha and PK.

In all her novels the past is presented in the first person, the present in the third. In the beginning of the novel, the description of the ancestral house, Viswas or the big house is a living presence in the novel. The name of the house is desired from an ancestor, the man who came down south with the Peshwa invading army and established the family here. But still the house proclaims the meaning by its society. Once Deshpande had admitted to Usha Tambe deigns with the characters first, even the themes emerge from the characters. (Tambe 115). In this novel, Gopal abandons his wife and children because, "I stopped believing in the life I was leading, suddenly it seemed unreal to me and I knew I could not go on (Deshpande 41). This episode or action prompts her father, Shripati to take Sumi and her daughter back to her parental home. Aru and other family members attempt to find out the reason behind Gopal's baffling decision only to realize that they do not really know him.

Aru realized that the greatest fears are trapped into their inactivity the fear of losing face, but now the rest in the fabric, gaping wide, for all to see in the novel, Shankar's mother in law tells Sumi to go back to her husband, because he is a good man.

According to Deshpande there is a sharp difference between a man's world and a woman's world. However, Gopal is different in the sense that he is able to present the whole aspect of his personality to a female and not just a part of himself. A man is always an outsider. But for a woman, from the moment she is pregnant, there is an overbidding reason for living, a justification for life.

The mother –daughter relationship has also occupied an important place in Deshpande's fiction. She does not give much credence to the mother as angel or goddess who is valorized in Indian culture. Mother – daughter relationships as acutely aware that the prevalent patriarchal ideology is strongly ingrained in women for them to treat their daughters as human beings in their own right. This is the evidence of Manorama's treatment of Kalyani. Kalyani is the reminder of Manorama's failure to have a son. Moreover she fulfilled none of the dreams Manorama had for her. It is clear that Manorama could have no more children, and she was afraid that Vithalrao might adopt a son or marry again. Kalyani is good at maths so she wanted to become an engineer, but Manorama did not allow her to complete her schooling and instead married Kalyani to her brother, Shripati. Perhaps, after this Manorama felt secure.

According to the narrator, the hero and heroine so much in the story of the arranged marriage is the parents. Manorama was married to Vithalrao, who was an educated son of a well to do man from Bangalore. Vithalrao's father did not hesitate to do what could have damned him in the society he lived in. Manorama's mother who had sent her daughter to Yamunabai's school at a time when sending a girl to school was something that could come in the way

of her marriage prospects. Moreover, Manorama's mother had induced her husband to write a letter to Vithalrao's father about the disaster that struck, just a month before the wedding was to take place. While coming for the vacations to Bangalore, four year old child somehow got lost at VT station.

It is clear that Shripati suspected Kalyani deliberately lost the mentally retarded child whom she found difficult to manage. Kalyani and her daughter did not see Shripati for nearly two months as he went on searching around the city like a madman for his lost son. Even though he was distraught and frantic for his son, it was an act of public desertion as he left Kalyani and her daughters on the platform, surrounded by curious strangers. After this, Kalyani like Sumi, went with her daughters to the ancestral home. After being forced by Manorama on her death-bed, Shripati returned back to Kalyani after more than two months. However, he stayed in his room and never spoke to her again. The first time he really talked to her was after her medical exams when he summoned her to his room to tell her that she was getting married to Anil.

The husband-wife relationship does not exist in isolation as stated earlier; it is affected by myriad fathers. Manorama did not relent in her anger towards her daughter. Manorama's ill-treated her daughter for disgracefully coming back home as a rejected wife. Moreover, it affected her relationship with Vithalrao and he had a stroke soon after.

Kalyani has turned the very weapon employed against her into her armor. This is her mode of silence resistance which is highly potent because it involved feelings and thoughts. Aru attempted to fathom the inscrutable nature of Kalyani and tried to reconcile her contradictory attitudes towards her. In some ways Aru plays the role of a heroine in the novel as the omniscient. Above all, Aru is trying to make sense of what is happening to her and others. However, Kalyani reminds Sumi of a spider, spinning an intricate delicate web into a beautiful design because of the variety of relationships she has at present. In the narrator's point of view, the family does not seem to realize that

the real miracle is Kalyani herself as Kalyani has survived intact, in spite of what Shripati did to her.

Kalyani has the right to all the privileges of the wife of a living husband. After Shripati's death they find in his will that he has left the house to Kalyani, but he had not cited her as his wife in his will but as the daughter of Vithalrao and Manorama. Goda looked anxiously at Kalyani when Anil read the will, but to Kalyani, the words that took away her marital status did not sting her.

The words have given her back her identity. Sumi who had begun to reclaim herself by indulging in gardening, learning the scooter, becoming economically independent and by writing plays is suddenly killed in an accident along with Shripati. It is interesting that the accident takes place when they have just mentioned Madhav, their lost son.

A Matter of Time is a composite study in human relationships. Gopal's absence seems to be similar to the departure of the British masters from India. The most striking example of silence is Kalyani who spends nearly forty years in total silence with her husband, Shripati. Finally this is a novel of human bonds and bondages and Gopal and Sumi's relationship is the most rewarding thing in it. Through this novel Shashi Deshpande proved that human relationship is the main theme and also she presented an exploration of woman's inner life.

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