

THEME OF HOPE AND DEVELOPMENT IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S A MATTER OF TIME

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INTRODUCTION

A Matter of Time is one of Shashi Deshpande's latest novels, published in 1996. In the present novel, Deshpande depicts the subtle process of oppression at work in marriage. The novel portrays a woman who is more mature and dignified than her predecessors. While the protagonists of her earlier novels can not think of themselves outside marriage, Sumi, the protagonist of the present novel, finds herself unperturbed in such a crisis. She manages herself admirably and becomes self-dependent. But, like Deshpande's earlier novels, this novel has also been interpreted in the light of feminist theories by most of the critics.

N.B. Masal deals with the novel as an exploration of a woman's inner life. He tends to analyse the novel as a feminist writing: "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 an inferior being, an unwanted child, a burden on the family for instance, Kalyani in A Matter of Time Marginalised men and silent women are depicted in A Matter of Time."¹ Some other critics describe it as a novel voicing the struggle of woman to achieve an identity in a male-chauvinistic world. According to Anita Singh, the novel "deals with theme of quest for a female identity."² Gur Pyari Jandial also expresses the same view when she says: "Shashi Deshpande's A Matter of Time particularly deals with the theme of the quest for a female identity. The complexities of man-woman relationships 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."³ R.S. Pathak⁴ sees the novel as a web of human bonds and bondages among three generations of a middle class family.

But the perspective of these critics is not balanced. It would be unjust to describe the novel only as a feminist writing. A penetrative study of the novel reveals that it raises many issues pertaining to marriage. This analysis of the institution of marriage in the novel provides useful insights into Deshpande's art and fiction. Here the theme of marriage is explored in its different forms and complexities along with the changes which are coming in this institution with the changing socio-cultural milieu. One important aspect dealt in the novel is the exploration of male psyche. Male characters are also dealt in full length and shown in positive light. But all these aspects have not been fully explored by the critics. They fail in analysing the institution of marriage in its different dimensions in the novel.

The novel, A Matter of Time, depicts a society in transition with the portrayal of the institution of marriage. A comprehensive picture of the Indian women belonging to different

generations, different educational and economic levels emerge on the large canvas of the novel. 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. All co-exist in a family that is modern but with certain old values. All of them have their own mindsets and values about marriage.

Manorama, who represents the first generation, came from a humble background and married to the rich Vithalrao. After her marriage, she broke off all the ties with her family except her younger brother, Shripati, who was born after her marriage. Manorama failed in giving a male heir to the family. She had a daughter, Kalyani, whom she regards as a symbol of her failure to have a son. In fact, woman is not treated at par with man as Ernestine also observes: "Humanity recognizes no sex; mind recognizes no sex; Life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery recognize no sex. Like man, woman comes involuntarily into existence; like him, she possesses physical and mental and moral powers ... like men she also enjoys or suffers with her country. Yet she is not recognized as his equal!"⁵

Vithalrao, Kalyani's father, never grudged 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. Vithalrao 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. He allowed Kalyani to study. 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. Manorama 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 important consideration in match-making. Deshpande depicts this aspect of matrimony in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* also. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the protagonist's mother says to her, "Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married."⁶

A boy's interest in Kalyani infuriated Manorama. Manorama did not allow Kalyani to complete her studies. Moreover, in order to prevent the property from going away to another family, Manorama got Kalyani married to Shripati, Manorama's youngest brother. Manorama 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."⁷

Manorama emerges as an insecure woman in the novel. She represents the domineering woman who takes the traditional superior place of her husband. She breaks the image of suppressed wife. Both Kalyani and Shripati are forced into a loveless marriage by her. It is a clear dig at the conservative society where marriage and son are the only things that matter.

Through the portrayal of the second generation pair, Kalyani and Shripati, Deshpande 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. Even if marriage fails in giving happiness of any kind to woman, it is preferred because it gives a security and a sense of dignity to woman in society. Kalyani is the only daughter of her parents. She is not allowed to complete her studies because marriage is the main consideration for her mother. 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" (p. 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. This is considered to be a disgrace to the family. Kalyani's father, a man of science, turns from science to astrology to know about her daughter's future life. He is hurt to see the misery of his daughter.

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 ..." (p. 167).

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" (p. 12). 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.

So, through the portrayal of Kalyani, Deshpande has shown that the institution of marriage is designed to reduce woman to the other of man and deprive her of her freedom to live her own authentic life. This leads to the denial of reciprocal relationship and harmony between the two sexes. But Deshpande does not limit her vision to the portrayal of woman's oppression in

marriage, rather she broadens her vision by suggesting the possible way-out and the power a woman can exercise within marriage. In Indian culture, where responsibilities outweigh desires, marriage is considered the be-all and end-all of existence. In the novel, a father, named Gopal, walks on in his wife and his three almost grown up girls. Sumi, Gopal's wife, seeks shelter in her parents' home with her three daughters. The three girls are confused and they want normalcy back in their life. How Sumi and her three daughters cope with the situation is the main focus of the novel.

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 go. 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.

The main reason of Gopal's walking out on his family is his childhood experiences. His childhood was not normal. His father took his brother's widow for wife. Gopal used to think that he was born of that incestuous relationship. Secondly, seeing his half-sister, Sudha, reduced from her affectionate self to be a peevish and self-centred one after her surgery and the loss of her husband, Gopal realizes the truth that one is inescapably alone. Apart from all this, Gopal's writing an article, the students' attack on him and his feeling of emptiness lead to this desertion. Gopal himself knows that "marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes – a lifetime of commitment – is not possible for all of us" (p. 69). He feels that he was failing the idealistic expectations of his marriage. Sumi accepts Gopal's decision with patience and with a matter-of-fact attitude. The stoicism of Sumi makes her an enigma in the eyes of other people.

Through the portrayal of Sumi's life, Deshpande questions the tradition which permits a man to abandon his responsibility of a householder in the name of religion or anything else. But a wife is unable to do so. Y.S. Sunita Reddy remarks in this context, "Episodes from history and mythology bear witness to men who were venerated for their selflessness while no thought was given to the silent suffering and martyrdom of their wives. Lakshmana's steadfastness and devotion finds no parallel in Indian mythology, while Siddhartha is hailed for spurning the luxury and comfort of princely life in pursuit of knowledge. Their respective spouses Urmila and Yashodhara, however, remain shadowy figures in the background, doomed to live a life of anonymity and insignificance."⁸

Sumi takes Gopal's 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 can not get along. She meets Gopal 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. But she is different from Indu in *Roots* and *Shadows* and Jaya in *That Long Silence* as she is not affected by the crisis. After Gopal's departure, she does not behave like a traumatized person. She does not behave like a child who

has lost his way. She realizes that Gopal is “going his way and I have to go mine” (p. 161). Sumi has the support and help of her family members – her parents, her daughters and her sisters. This support of the family helps her to withstand the trauma of desertion. But Sumi does not want any kind of economic assistance either from her parents or her other relatives. The step taken by Aru against Gopal for providing them maintenance is not approved by Sumi. She wants to be independent. She tries to transform her emptiness into meaning in order to redefine her identity. Sumi starts a new phase of her life and devotes herself to her job and her children.

A woman’s happiness is considered to be dependent on marriage. But Sumi revolts against this tradition. She brings normalcy back in her life and also in her daughters’ lives. She starts writing and her first play, *The Gardener’s Son*, becomes successful. Now, Sumi decides to deal with more daring themes like female sexuality. She decides to rewrite the story of *Surpanakha* from a different perspective : “Female sexuality. We’re ashamed of owning it, we can’t speak of it, not even to our ourselves. But *Surpanakha* was not, she spoke of her desires, she flaunted them. And therefore, were the men, unused to such women, frightened? ... It is this *Surpanakha* I’m going to write about” (p. 191).

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” (p. 220). Sumi dies just before she is about to begin a new life. But she has established her identity and found a meaningful existence before her death. Traditionally, marriage is considered to be the “only means of support and the sole justification”⁹ of a woman’s existence. But *Deshpande* has shown that a woman can also find meaningful existence even outside marriage. Sumi’s daughters also establish their identity. 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.

Concludingly, it can be said that *Deshpande* has minutely analysed the institution of marriage in its different dimensions in the novel. She has shown different types of marriages in the novel – love marriage as in the case of Sumi and arranged marriage as in the case of *Kalyani*. She has shown that a wife’s individual self is given no importance in patriarchal society and self-effacement is her normal way of life. But in this novel, *Manorama*, *Kalyani*, Sumi and Aru emerge ultimately as strong women who claim and achieve independence. They learn to live harmoniously in society neglecting neither the family relations nor the modern aspirations for autonomous self.

But *Deshpande* has also suggested the possible solutions so that woman can get out of the engagement and entrapment of marriage and establish her own identity. The role of education is particularly emphasized in this connection. Both Sumi and Aru are educated and they succeed in achieving an independent stand. *Meena Shirwadkar* observes, “As women received education they began to feel an increasing urge to voice their feelings. The awareness of individuality, the sense of compatibility with their tradition-bound surroundings, resentment of male-dominated ideas of morality and behaviour problems at home and at place of work or in society—all come up in a welter of projection.”¹⁰

Deshpande suggests that “self-pity is not the answer. It is only through a process of self-examination and self-searching, through courage and resilience that one can change one’s situation from despair to hope.”¹¹ This is the message conveyed in the novel as Deshpande puts it down: “If it is indeed true that we are bound to our destinies, that there is no point struggling against them, even then this remains – that we do not submit passively or cravenly, but with dignity and strength” (p. 246).

NOTES

¹N.B. Masal, “Shashi Deshpande’s A Matter of Time ‘As an Exploration of a Woman’s Inner Life,’ ” Shashi Deshpande : A Critical Spectrum, ed. T.M.J. Indra Mohan (New Delhi : Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2004), p. 15.

²Anita Singh, Indian English Novel in the Nineties and After : A Study of the Text and its Context (Delhi : Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2004), pp. 112-113.

³Gur Pyari Jandial, “Towards a New World Order : The Female Self in Shashi Deshpande’s A Matter of Time,” Shashi Deshpande : A Critical Spectrum, p. 50.

⁴R.S. Pathak, “A Matter of Time : Of Human Bonds and Bondages,” The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande, ed. R.S. Pathak (New Delhi : Creative Books, 1998).

⁵Ernestine, qt. in S. Prasanna Sree, Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande : A Study (New Delhi : Sarup and Sons, 2003), p. 1.

⁶Shashi Deshpande, The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980; rpt. New Delhi : Penguin Books, 1990), p. 45.

⁷Shashi Deshpande, A Matter of Time (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 1996), p. 129.

All subsequent textual references are from this edition and page numbers, in all such cases, have been given in parentheses following the quotations.

⁸Y.S. Sunita Reddy, qt. in Urvashi Sinha and Gur Pyari Jandial, “Marriage and Sexuality in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande,” Shashi Deshpande: A Critical Spectrum, p. 160.

⁹Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (1949; rpt. U.K: Vintage Classics, 1997), p. 446.

¹⁰Meena Shirwadkar, qt. in S. Prasanna Sree, Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande : A Study, p. 9.

¹¹Gur Pyari Jandial, “Towards a New World Order : The Female Self in Shashi Deshpande’s A Matter of Time,” Shashi Deshpande : A Critical Spectrum, p. 56.

Shashi Deshpande's novel *A Matter of Time* is set in the nineties of Karnataka and explores a woman's psyche. In the novel, Sumi's husband Gopal walks out of her life in a quite unpredictable way, for reasons even he cannot express. Gopal unburdens himself from all family responsibilities. Sumi then realizes the atrociousness of the situation and the burden which is thrust on her by her husband, leaving everything and Sumi in a shocking state. Even she demands for family maintenance but her mother disapproves it. Sumi has faith in hope and undergoes the pain with serenity, self-esteem and generosity of spirit. She tries to make her forget what Gopal has done: Do you want to punish him, Aru? I don't. Deshpande's novels ably deal the issues of modern educated women with her novel themes who choose to fight the traditions in a challenging way through her wise heroines of her novels which is the common theme for her novels. Discover the world's research. 17+ million members. A runaway. *A Matter of Time* is one of Shashi Deshpande's many novels to be published in New York in 1996. In this novel she depicts the theme of quest for identity. The novel portrays the story of. It concludes that by examining literary works for the way they discuss development problems and needs, the reader or researcher could achieve a new and, perhaps, a more personal [Show full abstract] understanding of the complexities of national development. Read more. Shashi Deshpande's novel deals with the theme of the quest for a female identity. The complexities of man-woman relationship specially in the context of marriage, the trauma of a disturbed adolescence. The Indian woman has for years been a silent sufferer. Anu Consequently has become mighty sensitive to the suffering and despair of others. In the *A Matter of Time* is a composite study in human relationship. The most striking example of silence is Kalyani who spends nearly forty years in total silence with her husband, Shripati but all women depended on themselves. Shashi Deshpande an eminent novelist has emerged as a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Shashi Deshpande novelist deals with the inner world of Indian woman in her novels she writes about the conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to women in the middle class society. A Woman's desires, efforts and failures in the traditional Indian society the main highlight of her novels. Her depiction of women's world is authentic, realistic and credible. *A Matter of Time* is an exploration of a woman's inner life. Conflict Between Tradition And Modernity In Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter Of Time*. 1482 Words | 6 Pages. Analysis Of That Long Silence By Shashi Deshpande. The Themes Of Silence's That Long Silence, By Shashi Deshpande. 1750 Words | 7 Pages. Gender Inequality In Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter Of Time*. 1325 Words | 6 Pages.