



Re-claiming identity in Shashi Deshpande's *a matter of time*

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Abstract: *Shashi Deshpande's A Matter of Time (1996) deals with the complexities of man-woman relationships, which by extension deals with the theme of quest for self. In keeping with her earlier thematic concerns, Deshpande concentrates in her novels on larger issues pertaining to human life in general. A Matter of Time is a novel dealing with the predicament of three strong women representing three generations of a family. This story is about pain, endurance, suffering and love, understanding and support extended to one another.*

Key words: *Pain, Endurance, Suffering and Love.*

SECTION I

The narrative of the novel encompasses the trauma of the protagonist, who attempts to break traditional moulds in which women are trapped. Other aspects of the novel include sexual discrimination, rejection of the dependency syndrome and introspection. In this sense there is a change in the concerns of the author, when compared to her earlier novels. The novelist tells in one of her interviews, "I have now reached a point...at which I feel there must be a change in my writing. I don't know what kind of change this will be; one gets straight after a while." (Riti 28) Deshpande's main concern being the predicament of women and their failures in the fast changing socio-economic milieu of India, she deals with the conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to women in the middle class society. Women are generally the centre of her fictional world with a focus on their desires, efforts and failures in traditional Indian society. However, she makes it clear that she is not the kind of

feminist who considers man as the cause of the troubles of women. Her depiction of women's world is authentic, realistic and credible, and her novels are suggestive of this aspect.

In keeping with the change in the stance of the novelist, Deshpande portrays in the novel the inner conflict in the mind of a man. The novel revolves around the urban and middle class family of an important character called Gopal. By focusing on a man, the novelist slightly moves away from the conventional theme of women. She accommodates issues of greater social and philosophical values, instead.

The novel presents the travails and reconciliation. They have their own values and mindsets and "a finely individualised unconventional relationships." (Deshpande 121) The author's concern in the novel is to portray not only the loss of identity in the conventional society but also reclaiming the same. Men and women characters who confront the hostile situations in life come to terms with the reality ultimately



reclaiming the identity and self-respect. The following sections are devoted to the examination of three generations of characters vis-à-vis reclaiming the identity.

SECTION II

The first generation is represented by Manorama; the second generation by her daughter, Kalyani; and the third generation by her grand-daughter, Sumi and the latter's daughters, Aru, Charu and Seema. This section examines Manorama, a first generation woman character in the novel. Manorama is dead as the novel begins. But the characterisation of Manorama is accomplished by means of what is constructed through the portrait as given by her daughter, Kalyani, granddaughter, Sumi and the great-granddaughters, Aru, Charu and Seema.

Manorama comes from poorer background than her husband, Vital Rao. After her marriage, she breaks off all ties with her own family. She maintains a tie with her youngest brother, who had been left motherless at the age of one. She feels, "Perhaps this boy, born after marriage, was the one child she never carried about and therefore brought her fewer reminders of a past she wanted to forget." Manorama gives birth to a girl child, Kalyani as against her wish to give birth to a son. For Manorama, Kalyani becomes an invisible symbol of her failure to have a son. Kalyani is her only daughter. Manorama always thinks about her daughter to be beautiful, accomplished and to make a wonderful marriage. She thus feels that her fulfilment lies in betting sons. Having been failed in this, she then attempts to see fulfilment in making her daughter grow femininely. She feels so because she desires to prove to all these people, who looked down upon her as the daughter of

a poor man. But Kalyani does nothing that would please her mother.

Coming from a humbler background than her husband, Manorama fails to overcome her fear that her husband might marry again, and that she had failed to beget a son. Kalyani, though intelligent and good in studies, is not allowed to complete her studies because of her mother's insecurity. Having been taken out of the school, Kalyani is married to Manorama's younger brother, Shripathi. Manorama does this so as to be secure. The narrator opines, "Perhaps after this, Manorama felt secure. The property would remain in the family now" (Deshpande 129). If Kalyani married any other person, the property would have gone to others. Therefore, Manorama planned that his daughter is married to her brother to safeguard her property. This is the sole reason for Kalyani marrying Shripati. Thus the novelist portrays Manorama in a way expected of the tradition and patriarchy true to the times in which the character lived.

Manorama emerges an insensitive and insecure woman. Manorama does not treat her daughter as a person but as a daughter. This kind of treatment of a female child may be considered victimisation in modern times. Kalyani survives victimisation. Yet she remains intact. In a world dominated by men, and in which marriage and sons are the only things that matter, Manorama is unable to see the good in Kalyani. This kind of attitude in Manorama continues even in the case of the daughters of her daughter. She is not able to enjoy with her grand daughters, Sumi and Premi. Kalyani realises this type of discrimination by her own mother:

For so many years I thought I had nothing...my mother didn't care for my



children either. Daughters again, she said. And when you were born, a daughter I wondered how she could have been so blind. Now when I look at you, my three grand-daughters, especially at you, I think I am luckier than my mother. She's the unlucky one who didn't know how to enjoy her children and grand children. (Deshpande 226-227)

The portrayal of Manorama is an example of the internalisation of patriarchy. From the portrayal of Manorama, one understands that she is an epitome of patriarchy as manifest in women. Deshpande portrays, through Manorama, the way many women live internalising the patriarchy. This is manifest in Manorama's desire for begetting sons instead of daughters.

SECTION III

This section examines the aspect of marital discord of Kalyani, who considers marriage as a part of life but not everything in itself. The section focuses on the way Kalyani develops into a mature woman, instead of breaking the marriage. She withstands silence with her husband for thirty years without considering it as a reason enough for walking out of it. The main thrust of the narrative is a thirty-year silence in the marital life of Kalyani and Shripati. Kalyani Gives birth to a son, after the first born daughter, Sumi. The son turns out to be mentally retarded. The next child, Premi happens to be a daughter again. Kalyani's marital life abruptly comes to an end with the loss of the mentally retarded son. The four-year-old boy gets lost in Bombay Railway Station while Kalyani is on her way to Bangalore on one of her usual visits to home. Her husband finds fault with her for the missing of their son. After two month's of futile search, her husband Sripathi returns only to live separately from his

wife. He withdraws from his wife. Since the day, their only mentally-retarded son, Madhav, was lost from the railway platform, Shripati inflicts silence as a weapon and a punishment on Kalyani.

Kalyani endures silence and punishment silently. She is able to surround others by love, caring, joy, warmth and happiness. Even this oppressive silence could not kill Kalyani's affection to the other members of the family. She is the anchor to the ill-fated members of the family. Kalyani overcomes this oppressive and hostile reality. She perhaps believes in destiny. Kalyani suffers on account of two reasons.

Besides being deserted by her husband, Kalyani undergoes travail on account of the failure of Sumi, her daughter's marriage. The irrational decision of her son-in-law, Gopal, to walk away from family causes tragedy to her. She never likes the tragedy of her life being repeated in the case of her daughter. She cries, "No....no, my God, not again" pathetically, "sounding so much like an animal in pain" (Deshpande 12). She meets and pleads Gopal to re-join the family, but in vain. She holds herself responsible for the outcome, "But how could she have known what being a good wife means when she never saw her mother being one? I taught her nothing, it's my fault, Gopala, forgive me and don't punish her for it" (Deshpande 47). Shripati leaves the family for he fails to forgive his wife's negligence. He sends her back to her parent's house with her two remaining children, Sumi and premi. Being on the death-bed, Monarama prevails upon her brother to return and live with his wife and daughters. He obliges her, but maintains silence with his wife.

Kalyani carries within her a sense of history. For her, the house is more than



just a house. Kalyani is the anchor of 'Big House' and is the invisible support for Sumi, a keen observer and a close friend to her grandchildren.

SECTION IV

This section explores the unusual relationship between a wife and husband as portrayed in the novel. The focus of the section is on the way a woman takes the marital discord in a compassionate way. The deprivation of the family of a son continues through Kalyani and Shripati to their daughter, Sumi. Sumi is married to Gopal. Noticing the complex net of relationships that Kalyani has with so many people, Sumi is reminded of the spider that she had seen one morning, "scuttling from point to point, drawing silken, threads out of itself, weaving in the process a web with a beautiful design" (Deshpande 185). As her mother, Kalyani was deserted by Sripathi, in the second generation, Sumi is deserted by her husband Gopal. There is a distinct parallel between Sripathi's desertion of Kalyani and Gopal's desertion of Sumi. But what is significant is that the women come to their own, and show the potential to shed the dependency syndrome. They learn to live without their husbands. Gopal's desertion is not just a tragedy. It is also shame and a disgrace for Sumi and her daughter. They consider it a social stigma that they have to bear. Sumi undergoes her own kind of suffering, "It takes time to get used to sharing your life with another person, now I have got used to being alone." (Deshpande 23).

A unique feature of this novel social reality as it is experienced by women. The novelist presents the world of mothers, daughters and wives. Indirectly, the world of the fathers, sons and husbands, the relation between men and women, and between women themselves also are

presented. By doing so, Deshpande portrays the clash of tradition without confining to the grooves of family in the narrow sense. She opines in an interview: Undoubtedly my novels are all about family relationships. But I go beyond that because the relationships which exists, parallel to the relationships which exist between human beings outside...when I am writing the family, it is not just about the family. It definitely does not limit my canvas. On the contrary, that is where everything begins. (Gangadharan 20)

This can be understood through Sumi, who is one of the most important characters in *A Matter of Time*. She is presented as a weak and feeble creature who returned to her parent's home. She returns as a deserted wife and is considered "a disgrace to the family" (Deshpande 10) in keeping with the Hindu orthodox belief. Sumi admits to have been "a great disappointment" to her parents not only because she was a girl but also because she was "none of those things" which her mother "would have liked her daughter to be" (Deshpande 226). Being a proud girl, she does not want anyone to show pity on her. She realises that life must go on and that she must be strong for the sake of her daughters. This aspect is reiterated throughout the novel.

The novel begins with Gopal's walking away from home. But the novelist did not provide adequate reasons for his decision. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in this connection finds it inexplicable as to why one had to walk away from home. Major part of the novel is, devoted to "the attempts of the relatives to find out why Gopal deserted his family so irresponsibly." (Mukherjee 20) A cursory reading of her other male character gives an impression that men are generally thin and typed. Contrarily, Gopal in the present novel is a round



character. He has been conceived and presented carefully. He serves an important function in the novel.

Sumi feels a sense of alienation. She feels hurt at the thought of her daughters blaming her for Gopal's action. "Do my daughters blaming me for what Gopal's has done? Do they think it is my fault? Why can't open my heart to them?" (Deshpande 23). Sumi wants her daughters to do the same in trying to cope with the reality. When her daughters are worried about his being dead or alive, "Sumi has no fears of his death, on the contrary, there is the certainty of his being alive, of his steadily pursuing his own purposes. While the others are trying to find reasons for what he has done, she knows that the reason lies inside him, the reason is him" (Deshpande 24). Gopal's desertion has affected Sumi's body and soul. She tries hard to survive through it, but the change in her is visible:

With Gopal's going, it was as if the swift-flowing stream of her had grown thick and viscous---her movement, her thought, her very pulse and heartbeats seemed to have slowed down. It had worried her family but it had been a necessary physical reaction to her emotional state, as if this slowing down was essential for her survival." (Deshpande 28)

Deshpande gives an account of the abrupt disintegration of Gopal's happy family. The novel also gives the diverse reaction of all the people concerned. When Gopal announces his desire to leave the family, his wife Sumi and their teenaged daughters, Aru, Charu and Seema are caught unawares by the decision of Gopal. At this sudden decision, his wife retreats into a shocked silence. His daughter, Aru tries to search for the reasons for his decision. Sumi and Gopal meet for the first time, after their

separation. But there are no tears, no abuses, no questions or explanations. There is no communication between them.

The subsequent part of the novel is a portrayal of the frustrations and trauma faced by Sumi. The support of her parents, sister and cousins comforts her to some extent cushioning her against the cruelties of life. Unlike the general idea of a deserted wife, Sumi does not crumble to pieces at the pain and humiliation inflicted on her. Within no time, she recovers from the shock. She adapts herself to the new reality, and adopts new style of life to suit the situation. She moves with her children, into her parental house, and helps her children to get on with their lives as before. This tragedy does not perturb her.

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