

Search for Self in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Abstract. Shashi Deshpande in the last decade of the 20th century holds great worth as an Indian English woman novelist. She is also known as a realist who has presented real pictures of the middle class of that decade. She is the only Indian woman author who has made an attempt to give a voice to the disappointment and frustration of Indian women. Her contribution to the world of fiction related to the conditions of Indian women is very significant. She knows well that Indian women have been the subject of suppression for a very long time. Being a realist, the novelist has depicted the weaknesses and shortcomings of both the males and females. The women characters in the novels of Shashi Deshpande depict such reality. Their voice is doomed in long silence. Sumi, the protagonist of the novel, *A Matter of Time*, is a female character who, too, suffers a lot due to her desertion by her husband without any valid reason. She is left alone to suffer with three young daughters in this wide world. The present paper intends to focus on the predicament of the women characters of the novel.

Keywords: Disappointment; suppression; desertion; predicament.

Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* deals with the human predicament of three women representing three generations of the same family. The women characters in the novels of Shashi Deshpande depict such reality. Their voice is doomed in long silence. Sumi, the protagonist of the novel, *A Matter of Time*, is a female character who, too, suffers a lot due to her desertion by her husband without any valid reason. Though she has the guts to suffer silently, she is not frustrated or disappointed. After desertion she soon picks up the race of the life and continues the struggle without Gopal, her husband, for the survival and future of her three unmarried daughters, Aru, Charu and Seema.

Shashi Deshpande's novels contain so much that can be regarded as the staple material of feminist thought. Her portrayal is unique in the sense that she neither represents the old orthodox image nor a modern westernised woman. Rather, she is a woman of Indian middle class who tries to rise above traditions but is involuntarily adopted into it because of marriage bond and social norms. Marriage has nothing but disillusionment in all her novels. It becomes difficult or rather impossible for her to break up the established ideal wife-husband relationship based on female's submissiveness and male's dominance. Deshpande's women are not ready to revolt against traditions and live independently without the support of husbands. This is the predicament of the Indian women.

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The women protagonists of Deshpande's novels have the realisation that they have to exist under long established age-old societal norms based on unchangeable religious taboos. They also understand that under such suffocating atmosphere they have been subjected to undergo suffocation and humiliation. It is true that they know their significance but only within the limited purview of their own life. According to Prasanna Sree :

In a way these women have no interest to raise their feelings as modern feminists do with the capacity to purge society of its evils and blaze forth in a trail of glory. (Prasanna 2006:134)

Family, marriage and social norms bind them completely. Even the political laws, which guarantee her the same quantum of civic and political rights, remain on paper only. That is exactly what Deshpande has tried to convey in her novel Amur rightly says:

Women's struggle in the context of contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being, is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as creative writer. (Swain 2005:125)

Accepting the same truth, Tapiti Lahiri says:

Marital problems, familial disharmony, financial difficulties taken together, all these subjugate and enslave woman to a considerable extent that she cannot but endure everything, tolerate all kinds of masculine oppression silently. (Lahiri 2005:196)

Deshpande is aware of all these women's problems in India. The issue that has major concern in the writings of Deshpande is how to get honourable adjustment of women in the society within the framework of marriage system. Swain observes:

The tragic predicament of Deshpande's protagonists is the outcome of male-domination in a patriarchal culture. Their silent suffering is socio-psyche in nature. In her quest for identity, the protagonists of Deshpande move from despair to hope, from self-negation to self-assertion. Her struggle throughout is to attain wholeness, completeness and an authentic selfhood. (Swain, 125)

Shashi Deshpande's novel *A Matter of Time* deals with the human predicament of three women representing three generations of the same family. This novel of Deshpande is different from her other novels in the sense that it is

related not only to feminism but also to a man, the protagonist of the novel. Being a realist, the novelist has depicted the weaknesses and shortcomings of both the males and females. However, as usual her attention has gone much to the pain, agony, suffering and endurance of married women in this novel also. It is all because Deshpande champions the cause of the Indian women who are the subjects of suppression, exploitation, victimization and negligence even among the family members. Her concern has been to expose the sufferings of women in the hands of their own family members including their husbands. This novel portrays the picture of a lady, namely, Sumi, who is not exploited by her husband directly, but she suffers due to sudden and selfish escape of her husband, Gopal, leaving all responsibilities of the family upon her shoulder.

The novel moves round an urban middle class family of Gopal and Sumi with their three daughters – Aru, Charu and Seema. Sumi is an educated lady and who is matured enough to know the reality of life. She is the protagonist and has the quality to bear the adverse circumstances maintaining long silence without complaining against anyone. Gopal, the husband of Sumi, maintains cordial relations with his wife and daughters so long as he lives with them, but he deserts them suddenly for the reason which is known to none, even not to Gopal.

The novel takes the turn with Gopal entering the house and telling Sumi that he is leaving the house for good. Sumi does not take it seriously and remains calm. As per her nature, she is unable to react verbally. In the early morning she senses that Gopal, in fact, did not pass the night with her. Thereafter, she tells her daughters about the fact repeating Gopal's words what he had said to Sumi. What is surprising is that the novelist never discloses what Gopal had said to Sumi before he left the family. But Gopal's action shocked Sumi to the extent that she lapses into complete silence trying simultaneously to keep things normal for her daughters. Despite her façade of normality, which she tries to maintain artificially, reflects "a kind of blankness that made uneasy to her daughters." (Deshpande 1966:10-11). Knowing from Gopal that he is leaving the family, she does not stop him. Rather she interprets Mukesh's philosophic song 'jeena yahan, marna yahan, iske siwa jana kahan' (to live here and die here as there is no place to go anywhere), which she hears from the T.V. She thinks:

This world is all we have and therefore there is nowhere else for us to go. Or does it mean, this is what we have; this area of action is enough for us, we live here and die here, we need no more? (14)

Moreover, while interpreting the song from one angle to another, over and over again, she does not come to the final conclusion. At last, she feels exhausted and goes to sleep. However, she learns that the flow of life is such that one has to

live because there is no alternative to escape from life. It is this understanding that gives her more courage and energy to face the situation and struggle whether it is favourable or unfavourable.

Shashi Deshpande knows well that the world in which all creatures live is a puzzle. But the truth which is visible is that one has to live whether life is pleasant or unpleasant, happy or unhappy, full of pleasures or displeasure. One is bound to live because there is no escape. The endless circle of life continues even after the death of the creatures in this world. One comes and goes, but the continuity of existence of life remains intact. Sumi, perhaps, tries to know the same truth while interpreting Mukesh's song. When Sumi meets Gopal in his hiding place, there is no hot discussion or quarrel between them because Sumi does not want to argue or quarrel with her husband. Thereafter the realisation comes to her:

We can never be together again. 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. (49)

Sumi is a female character, self-respecting lady and having strong will to move ahead independently. The adverse circumstance, through which she has to pass now, has made her more determined and self-respectful. She is not a lady character who can fight with her husband and pressurise him to share the responsibility. She knows that every one has a mind to decide what to do and every one shall have to face the consequences of his/her decision and acts. Her feelings of self-respect are so great that she denies to accept money offered to her by Ramesh as a share of parental property. She says to Ramesh:

I have begun to think that what Gopal has really done is to take *sanyas*. I'm surprised none of you have thought of that. But look what has happened, it is not he who's going around with the begging bowl, it's I who am doing that. (63)

Deshpande's women characters have the realisation and understanding of their sufferings, no doubt, but they lack the courage as well as stamina, "to purge society of its evils and blaze forth in a trail of glory". (Prasanna, 134) Sumi is not an exception. She knows that her troubles have multiplied due to irresponsible behaviour of her husband. She also knows that what Gopal has done by deserting her and her children cannot be justified. But she maintains absolute silence only because she lacks the mentality and activity to fight against such injustice. Rather

Search for Self in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* she decides to take the responsibility that is of her husband and allows Gopal to follow his own course of life freely.

The question, which emerges in Sumi's mind related to relationship between a wife and a husband, is the question of million dollars. The novelist through Sumi raises such vital issue drawing the attention of readers. Such ideal relationship is not meant only for making love, satisfying sexual instinct and breeding children. It is a pious relation which succeeds on mutual co-operation, equal feeling from both sides and sincere dutifulness to each other.

Thus, Sumi's worry for her daughter's future is a problem which is not only hers but it is a common problem of the mothers whose husbands are irresponsible and who either desert the family or keep aloof from the family's responsibility. Sumi without any complaint against her husband resumes the responsibility to look after her children without Gopal. Sumi must be appreciated for her struggle against survival. Her bravery to bitterness of the life is exemplary. She has come to term with her present with a new born understanding to move ahead in life without any bitterness for the man who had been the cause of her humiliation and sufferings. She has emerged as a new woman with new valour, a new courage and a new consciousness. She decides to be a teacher and writer. But this was not agreeable to her destiny. Sumi and her father, Shripati, met their tragic end in a road accident. This gives a philosophic dimension to the novel.

Sumi is left out by Gopal for her whole life at the mid of her age and she goes under a great silence. Thus, it is obvious that like other female characters of Deshpande, Sumi, too, has to face adversity of the life for which they are not responsible. The most surprising thing is that though Sumi has the courage to carry on the responsibility of the life without husband, she has no courage to fight for her right and status. She tolerates injustice making no protest. The novel reflects the truth that the Indian women belonging to a male-dominated society based on the traditional moorings, have no way out other than to endure silently insult, humiliation and negligence meted out to them by none but by their husbands.

Other noted novelists like R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao have given a new wave of realism in the first decade of 20th century. R.K.Narayan's *The Dark Room* is a good example conveying this theme. The story of this novel is a wholly serious tale of silent suffering in the adverse situation. The victim is Savitri who finds her husband being attracted to Shanta Bai, a working woman. Savitri leaves her husband but ultimately she returns and suffers silently.

A Matter Of Time, Deshpande's masterpiece clearly shows her eagerness to concentrate on larger issues pertaining to human life. On the occasion of receiving the Brooker Prize, Arundhati Roy has expressed, *A Matter Of Time* presents three

generations in the same family and under the same roof. I also intend to investigate these questions in relation to other novels such as Santa Gokhale's *Rita Welinker* and Shobha De's *Sisters*. In these novels we find the 'normal' man-woman relations get disrupted and women find solace in the bond with other women. Thus Deshpande's novel *A Matter of Time* articulates the agony pain, doubts and fear of her protagonists—male and female alike. She does not fight for justice to women at man's cost but presents their respective limitations as spouse.

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