

Existential Predicament in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Shashi Deshpande presents a realistic image of the middle class educated women who form a considerable majority of the contemporary Indian society. Deshpande portrays the middle class women who is torn in the strife between tradition and modernity. The outstanding contribution of Shashi Deshpande to the realm of Indian fiction is that she has broken the age-old stereotyped image of Indian women and has enabled the readers to see women as they are. The women in her novels have no inclination to fit into the moulds of Sita and Savitri. Her women are portrayed not as goddesses but as real human beings of flesh and blood who have their own desires, strength and weaknesses.

A Matter of Time marks a significant change in Deshpande's novels. For the first time, Deshpande succeeds in creating a round male character – Gopal. In Deshpande's other novels woman occupy the central space. But in the present novel Gopal has the novelist's sympathy and turns out to be the most convincing character in the novel having strong philosophic inclinations. Through Gopal, Deshpande explores her existential concerns. While retaining her older concerns, Deshpande concentrates on larger issues pertaining to human life and human predicament. Deshpande said in an interview that she wants to reach a stage where she can write about human beings and not women or men. The present novel certainly seems to exemplify this.

A Matter of Time presents three generations in the family. The novel begins with Gopal's walking away from home and the major part of the novel is devoted to the attempts of the relatives to find out the reasons of this desertion. The novel gives an account of the ancestry of Kalyani and sketches the anxieties of her parents, Vithal Rao and Manorama because they were not blessed with a son. Manorama was constantly tormented by the fact that her husband might remarry to have a son who would inherit his property. P. Spratt in *Hindu Culture and Personality: A Psychoanalytic Study* rightly points out :

The uncommonly intense desire for a son among Hindus is well-recognised. It is traditionally attributed to the doctrine that unless his son performs the obsequies, a man's soul cannot go to Heaven.

In almost all the novels of Deshpande, the desire and preference for sons is very honestly portrayed. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is neglected in preference to her brother Dhruva, Indu is left in the custody of the family by her father when she is just a fifteen day old motherless child, Jaya's mother (*That Long Silence*) shows a marked preference for her sons. In the same way, *A Matter of Time* also tells about the predicament of a mother's longing for a son. Discerning intelligence and ambition in Shripati, Manorama's younger brother, Vithalrao helps the boy by educating him and making him a lawyer. Manorama, later on exploits this indebtedness of her brother, and in order to prevent the family property going from her family gets Kalyani married to Shripati. The marriage is doomed from the very beginning as Kalyani also is not very comfortable in accepting a feared maternal uncle as her husband.

Kalyani's marital life comes to an end, with the loss of her mentally retarded four year old son. The boy is lost at the Bombay railway station while Kalyani is going to Bangalore on one of her usual visits home. Shripati goes to check the reservations. Kalyani is attending to the crying baby and the little child wanders away. For many days Shripati frantically searches for him in the streets of Bombay, but to no avail. Shripati apparently holds Kalyani responsible for the accident and stops speaking to her. Shripati's complete withdrawal puts an end to their married life.

Sumi and her sister Premi are brought up in this stifled atmosphere. The novelist only hints at Kalyani's predicament and much is left to the reader's imagination. But one thing is very clear. In spite of the unfavourable circumstance, Kalyani does not lose the zest for life. She is an anchor in an otherwise unnatural family. Kalyani is deeply shocked when she comes to know about Gopal's desertion of his wife and children. She feels as if the history is repeating itself. With all her sincerity, Kalyani urges Gopal to save Sumi from the humiliation that she has faced in her life. Kalyani symbolises the self-effacing Indian women for whom marriage is the end of life, as far as a female is concerned. Kalyani even conjectures "carelessness" on the part of Sumi and takes the blame on herself for the drawback.

But... how could she have known what 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.

Kalyani is very keen on getting a good match for her grand-daughter, Aru and this surprises everyone. Here one is reminded of Dr. Bhaskar in *The Binding Vine*, who wonders at Shakutai's enthusiasm for getting her daughters married, when she herself has got nothing out of it.

Both Sumi and Gopal are exceptional people. Like other protagonists of Deshpande, Sumi is a stoic person with an immense power of tolerance. To have it in the words of Deshpande herself:

Sumi is born like that. She is a little detached. That detachment is a part of her, and it is nothing to do with liberation or feminism. That is how she is made, but she is not unperturbed. She suffers acutely because her husband has left her. She does not want to reveal it and she also is a kind of person who wants to 'get on' with her life, she does not want to get struck so that's important thing for her.

Right from her childhood, Sumi is graceful and beautiful. She has a number of striking qualities without any trace of vanity. Any other women in Sumi's place would have been perturbed. But Sumi shows extraordinary patience after Gopal's desertion. Sumi herself tells her daughter that she cannot hate a person for a longer time. Her sister Premi speaks about Sumi's superiority over her.

Sumi does not ask any explanation from Gopal as to why he left them without any apparent reason, but the question in her mind remains unsaid:

... if I meet Gopal I will ask him one question.... the question no one has thought of. What is it, Gopal, I will ask him, that makes a man in this age of acquisition and possession walk out on this family and all that he owns? Because... it was you who said that 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 you back on everything in your life? Will you be able to give me an answer to this?

Aru (Arundhati), the eldest daughter of Sumi and Gopal, is quite angry with her father and even thinks of asking for maintenance through court. Sumi is graceful in her behaviour and she rejects such ideas.

Sumi very rightly assesses Gopal. Somehow Gopal feels himself incapable of having permanent relationships. The feeling of inner emptiness is always there in him. Gopal feels grateful to Sumi when she spares him any questions. Gopal is the pivotal figure in the novel. Gopal is not a sadist like Manu of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* or a fraud like Mohan of *That Long Silence*. Gopal is a forty-seven year old thin man who is timid and straightforward by nature. Gopal's body language clearly marks him as a non-aggressive male. Kalyani and Premi – both are very fond of Gopal.

Gopal admits to have fallen in love with Sumi's beautiful personality first. He is a loving father and helps Sumi in bringing up their three daughters viz. Aru, Charu and Seema. Because of Gopal's nature, the relatives and friends are unable to absorb Gopal's walking away. When Sumi's sister Premi attempts to bring about a compromise between Sumi and Gopal, he discloses his loss of faith in life by quoting Yudhistara:

We see people die and yet we go on as if we are going to live forever.... it's the secret of life itself. We know it is all there, the pain and suffering, old age, loneliness and death, but we think, somehow we believe that it is not for us... The miracle failed for me and there was nothing left. You've got to be Buddha for that emptiness to be filled with compassion for the world. For me there was just emptiness.

Gopal is touched by the essential loneliness of human existence. Gopal's renunciation of the family sounds like Sanyasa – the Vedic concept of the third ashram in the life of man. But it is not so. Vanprastha comes when one has fulfilled all his responsibilities. Gopal leaves his family unsettled. Gopal's decision is more a withdrawal in pain than renunciation. Gopal's predicament is more near to that of an existentialist. The total disillusionment with the world reminds one of Anita Desai's Nirode in *Voices in the City*. Gopal quietly absorbs the accusations flung by Kalyani and Aru as inevitable reactions. The interview of Gopal by Surekha the lawyer does not suggest any spitefulness on the part of Gopal.

Sumi takes control of her life and plans many things. Her creativity gets revived and she writes a play entitled *The Gardner's Son* and proposes to write another. Sumi also wants to write Surpanakha's story from original point of view. Sumi seems to echo Deshpande's views when she talks of female sexuality. Sumi feels that man felt threatened by Surpanakha because she was not afraid of displaying her sexuality. When Sumi is thinking of all such constructive things, she suddenly dies of an accident, just before her taking up a job. Sumi's father Shripati is also there with her on the scooter and their bodies are found mangled. Sumi dies when she so much wants to live. Just before her death, Sumi has a glimpse of her father's humanness which is suppressed under years of reticence and withdrawal.

However, Shashi Deshpande visualizes hope in Aru who is "the focal point" in the novel. In a totally detached and impersonal manner she observes and tries to

understand the circumstance which her family is going through. Deshpande declares Aru to be the heroine of the story basing her evaluations on the norms prescribed in the *Natyashastra*. Aru has youth and beauty and the qualities such as nobility and steadfastness. Aru is the most sensitive character in the novel who sincerely feels the predicament of others and silently reaches out to them. Marriage does not attract her as she tells Premi that she is not going to get married. Aru finds nothing but betrayal in man-woman relationship. Aru fails to understand the finer points of marriage because of her immaturity and also because she witnesses so many failed marriages around her, e.g. Shripati and Kalyani's, Sumi and Gopal's, Goda and Bhauji Kaka's etc.

The most important point about Aru is the radically different and unconventional relationship that she develops with her grandmother Kalyani. Initially not a cordial one, the relationship later on develops into a fine partnership. Aru becomes the anchor in Kalyani's life when she loses both her husband and daughter. Aru declares that she will be like a son to her and will never leave her.

A Matter of Time has attracted criticism on account of the technique. In almost all her novels, Deshpande's narration swings backward and forward thereby juxtaposing the past and the present. Deshpande makes an intertextual reference to *Natyashastra* and even there is an allusion to the future events. All this makes Meenakshi Mukherjee comments:

....there are too many references to the future that lies outside the time frame of the novel – tantalizing at first, but by the end unsatisfactory of the three sections in the novel – the last one seems to be the least finished, with many loose threads hanging, almost like a first draft and certainly untouched by a publisher's editor.

One can assert that the novel is a meaningful statement of human relationships extended through the medium of family. In spite of the generation gap, human relationships tend to have a continuity thereby imparting true significance to the human life. *A Matter of Time* is also remarkable for the creation of Gopal, the first round male character in Deshpande.

To sum up one can safely say that Shashi Deshpande's fictional world is densely populated. Deshpande's keen sense of observation enables her to gain deep access in their psyche. Her range is also considerably wide and includes both urban and rural characters. The novels are usually presented through the consciousness of her female narrators or female protagonists. Family becomes a medium through which Deshpande contemplates about human predicament and existential concerns. Loneliness of human existence haunts her consistently.

Work Cited

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