

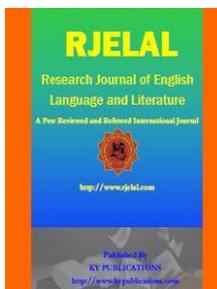


SUBORDINATION TO SELF-ASSERTION IN THE NOVEL *A MATTER OF TIME* BY SHASHI DESHPANDE

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande's novels are about a woman, her travails and privations, tensions and irritations, pains and anguishes. *A Matter of Time* suggests that compromise is what characterizes the life of the common run of the middle-class women in India. Unable to defy social conventions or traditional morality, the middle-class women themselves are enmeshed by desires and despairs, fears and hopes, loves and hates, withdrawal and alienation, suppression and oppression, marital discord and male chauvinism. Indeed, Deshpande's chief thematic concern is with a woman's struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian society, her effort to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother, and most of all as a human being.

Key Words: Desertion, Betrayal, Cruelty, Oppression, Hopes, Identity.

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INTRODUCTION

The present study explores the novel of the very famous and an eminent Indian woman writer Shashi Deshpande who represent the contemporary woman's struggle to define and attain an autonomous self-hood. Her female protagonists are able to free themselves from the stultifying traditional constraints after a long and bitter struggle. She has used various methods to convey the state of a women's mind and her true feelings. The use of interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness technique is one that attempts to convey the inner life of character's thought and feelings. The woman of today stands poised on the threshold of social change in an unpleasant position. She is intensely aware of the injustice heaped on her and unlike her counterpart a generation ago. She doesn't believe that woman is an inferior being who must remind passive and submissive. This is awakening of the woman's consciousness as

delineated by Deshpande. All her novels reveal instinctive ability to articulate the feelings of the contemporary, urban, educated upper middle-class woman who is caught in the transitional period between tradition and modernity. Women's lives in India, their problems, and the domestic sphere have been consuming themes of most of Deshpande's work. *A Matter of Time*, first published in India in 1996, re-emphasizes Deshpande's passion for these issues as she weaves a simple, ingenuous tale of the contradictions of male ambivalence and cruelty, female stoicism and shame, human desire and desertion.

Anguish and Repression Of The Protagonist

In *A Matter of Time*, her fifth novel, Deshpande for the first time enters into the metaphysical world of philosophy. Basically, it is about three women from three generations of the same family and tells how they cope with the tragedies in their lives. Sumi is deserted by her

husband Gopal, and she faces her humiliation with great courage and stoicism. Deep inside, she is struck with immense grief, and tries to keep herself composed for the sake of her daughters. Sumi, is dauntless in her adversity —she evolves herself from utter desolation and bitterness linked up with invisible chains of patriarchal pressure and other family responsibilities. It records how with courage, dignity, responsibility and independent spirit, even after desertion by her husband, she has reached a stage of self sufficiency and self-fulfillment. At the heart of the novel is eighteen-year-old Aru, struggling to understand her father's 'desertion' and her mother's 'indifference', and in the course of a few turbulent months, forging entirely unexpected relationships that are destined to change the course of her life.

Sumi the main woman character of the novel is different from the women protagonists of Deshpande's earlier novels. She is gradually emancipating herself as a new and independent woman who has evolved from utter desolation and bitterness linked with invisible chains of patriarchal pressure and family responsibilities. Gopal's desertion makes her experience the trauma of a deserted wife and the anguish of an isolated partner. When Gopal walks out on her for reasons even he cannot articulate, Sumi returns with their three daughters, Aru, Charu and Seema, to the shelter of the Big House, where her parents, Kalyani and Shripati, live in a strange silence and they have not spoken to each other in the last thirty-five years. Gopal's desertion is not just a tragedy; it is both a shame and a disgrace. When her daughters are worried about Gopal being dead or alive, Sumi has no fears of his death. While the others are trying to find reason for what he has done, she knows that reason lies inside him. And yet Sumi has her own question to ask Gopal, without blaming him, she is curious to know, how has taken the decision to disown the things and people in this age of an acquisition and possession: "*If i meet Gopal I will ask him one question, just one the question no one has thought of what is it, Gopal ... that makes a man in this age of acquisition and possession walk out on his family*".

As the mystery of this long silence is unravelled, a horrifying story of loss and agony is laid bare, a story that seems to be repeating itself in Sumi's life. The lives of three generations of women living in their family home, "the Big House," seem to be ruled by similar patterns of destiny. In fact, destiny is the word of choice of one of the central characters, the grandmother with a loving heart whose sharp tongue masks the pain of past scandals and secrets. Deshpande crafts a suspenseful story about why Kalyani was forced into an arranged marriage with her maternal uncle Shripati, and about the tragedy that led Shripati to desert his wife. Shripati returns to live in an isolated room in the Big House, but ceases talking to Kalyani. No wonder, then, thirty-five years later, Kalyani is shattered by another man's desertion—this time that of her son-in-law, Gopal, who walks out on her daughter. This inexplicable act sets in motion a process of change, a fulfilment of destiny, and an unravelling of age-old secrets harboured by the extended family. The Big House, the only enduring witness of the ever-turning wheel of karma, is always ready to enfold the "victims" in its cavernous bosom. Although Deshpande's description of the gardens of the Big House is sensuous, she shies away from letting her characters examine their intimate relationships with each other. They are more comfortable solving psychological conundrums than unravelling the sexual tensions that lurk, underscoring the taboo nature of the subjects of sex and the sensuous in modern Indian society.

Subordination To Self-Assertion

Shashi Deshpande tries to show in the novel new, changed Indian woman who stands at the crossroads, caught between tradition and modernity. The underlying theme of the novel is how the woman protagonist, after undergoing mental turmoil, comes to self realization and emerges as fuller human being. Deshpande expresses the position of woman in a patriarchal society —someone without a clear sense of purpose and without a firm sense of her own identity. Her women characters do not place themselves in the centre of a universe of their own making, but rather are always painfully aware of the demands and needs of others.

A Matter of Time, instead, dwells on the seeming vagaries of destiny, or time. Melodrama often interrupts the commonplace, and the protagonist finds way to support each other in the shifting sands of pain and pleasure, and to re-establish their dominance over domestic terrain. She does not remain victims, despite their unquestioning acceptance of male flight from the family. And the men are transformed from betrayers into objects of self-pity, trapped in a morass of human flaws and psychic distress. For a while, Sumi seems to be succeeding in gaining a small degree of personal independence. She starts teaching, writes a play that earns plaudit, and even learns to drive a scooter, in a land where few women are seen in the driver's seat. The man –woman relationship in the novel is oppressive, strange, uncomfortable or silent. Sumi and Gopal stand out uniquely in spite of the fact that Gopal leaves them for something unattainable. When Sumi and Gopal for the first time, meet after their separation, there are no tears, no abuses, no questions or explanations. when Sumi enter his room, Gopal is having his lunch and reading a book of poems. Jasbir Jain comments:

A matter of time, the author subtly debates the whole issue of individual freedom. The novel has three parts –The House ,The Family ,The River and each title carries within it a meaning. 'The House' is the body; it is also memory and lineage, The coming together of all different elements...'The family 'consists of three generations.... The third part 'The River' is about immersion in the river waters which clean and purify.⁴⁰

Conclusion

A Matter of Time has revealed the fears, frustrations and compulsions of three women from three generations of the same family. It records how with courage, dignity, responsibility and independent spirit, even after being deserted by her husband, Sumi has reached a stage of self –sufficiency and self –fulfillment. Sumi, the protagonist comes out all the hurdles and crises which weaved by the family especially by her husband. She does not raise any question when her husband walks out from her and kept long silence

then she draws confidence and courage to face the patriarchal world along with her daughters.

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