

A Feminist Study of Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

Dr. Divya Mishra

Assistant Professor, IILM University, Greater Noida

Abstract

The theme of *A Matter of Time* talks about women's emancipation. The story depicts what happens when a husband leaves his wife and children in a lurch and how a woman overcomes all the hurdles without any agitation. This novel is slightly different from other novels of Deshpande in the sense that it doesn't focus upon husband as a sheltering tree for women. It focuses on the fact that a woman can be herself and can do everything in her life without her husband's support. Through the different characters, Deshpande expresses her views related to women's individuality, their assertiveness, their anguish. In this novel, she has dealt with greater issues as a woman helping other women. Sisterhood has been given much importance.

Keywords: freedom, rights, feminism, identity, patriarchy, discrimination, dilemma

Shashi Deshpande in *A Matter of Time* (1996) presents a female protagonist, Sumi. Sumi's husband has left her after marriage, and she returns to her mother. Though her mother keeps persuading to return to her husband, Sumi is too self-respecting to agree to any compromise with her life. The novel revolves around women of three generations – Kalyani as grandmother; Sumi as mother; Aru, Charu and Seema as daughters. Sumi is different from Saru, Indu, Jaya and Urmi – the protagonists of Deshpande's other novels who seek refuge in their marriages while Sumi seems to be more assertive as she doesn't want to cling to her marriage to live her life. The story starts with the trauma of Sumi when her husband, Gopal, deserts her and their children without any obvious reason. Sumi comes back to her parents' house and decides to live an independent life with her daughters. She successfully shoulders her responsibility in making her daughters independent. Sumi's life evolves from utter desolation and anguish yet she never loses her courage to face her life's ups and downs. Deshpande has given a realistic account of an abrupt disintegration of Sumi and Gopal's eighteen years' married life and the reactions of all people concerned.

Sisterhood has been given much importance. Her earlier novels are intensely personal as the protagonists are involved in their personal lives. So much attention has been given to them, not to other characters. Deshpande justifies this change. She answers to Prasanna Shree:

So I had to move out of that because I had come to the end of that road and I have to move away, and this was more a kind of an outward journey, not so much inward journey. This sisterhood is something which I think is part of the Indian society. (149)

The theme of *A Matter of Time* is women's emancipation. The story depicts what happens when a husband leaves his wife and children in a lurch and how a woman overcomes all the hurdles without any

agitation. This novel is slightly different from other novels in the sense that it doesn't focus upon husband as a sheltering tree for women. It focuses on the fact that a woman can be herself and can do everything in her life without her husband's support. Sumi feels shocked when she comes to know about Gopal's decision to leave home. Gopal very practically walks away from his family, evading his responsibilities towards his family. He waits for Sumi's response for a while but leaves when she doesn't say anything. In fact, Sumi feels so shocked that she doesn't get the right words to express her agony at that point of time. Gopal has ended twenty three years of relationship and leaves his wife at the age of forty.

There are different reactions of family members at his walking out. Sumi's mother thinks herself responsible and pleads to him to come back. Even Gopal does not know any concrete reason which compelled him to take such a decision of leaving his family. He is not able to explain to anybody and keeps his thoughts inward. He only assures that Sumi is not responsible for his move and therefore she should not be blamed. Premi, Sumi's sister thinks that after being humiliated by the college students, he resigned from his job. This, perhaps, could be the reason. When Premi probes into Gopal's psyche, he replies, "I can give you so many answers, but I've begun thinking that the plain truth is that I just got tired" (133). There are few references in this novel related to his past which show that his childhood was not normal. His father had married his brother's widow and he probably thought that he has born out of that union. This thought could have baffled him. It could be the reason for his having lost faith in marriage. Sumi knows that Gopal believes that "Marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes – a lifetime commitment – is not possible for all of us" (69). Sumi remembers one proposal given by Gopal that if either of them wanted to be free, he or she would be allowed to leave. She reminds Gopal about this and says:

And I agreed. I was only eighteen then and you were twenty-six . . . but it meant nothing to me then. How can you think of separating, of wanting to be apart, when you are eighteen in love? . . . I thought we would always be together. (221)

These lines show that Deshpande's heroines believe in love and relationship that lasts forever. They don't seem to have radical views related to marriage and family. However, Sumi is conscious of the changes taking place in Gopal's behaviour. She tells him:

Then you began to move away from me. I knew exactly when it happened. And I knew I could not stop you, I could do nothing. When you left, I knew I would not question you, I would just let you go. (221)

Sumi, unlike other heroines of Deshpande, is very calm and composed. In spite of bearing all the humiliation and disgrace, she is not interested in knowing the reason behind Gopal's move. She knows that ". . . the reason lies inside him, the reason is him" (24). She wanted to ask him only one question that, however, remains unasked.

. . . if I meet Gopal I will ask him one question, just one, 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 his 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 your back on everything in your life? Will you be able to give me an answer of this? (27)

Sumi raises a very genuine question where men do not think twice before taking any decision. Deshpande has projected a difference between the psyche of a man and woman. Women are made to feel for their deviation from conventional norms while men never feel ashamed of their foolish acts. Gopal decides to walk out of the longstanding marriage because of his lack of interest and doesn't even feel guilty of it. Deshpande has portrayed Gopal as a confused person whose background seems to be responsible for such behaviour. He seems to be an idealist who finds a void in his life and decides to quit all relationships. He says, "I stopped believing in the life I was leading, suddenly it seemed unreal to me and I knew I could not go on" (41). This attitude of Gopal depicts his irresponsible behaviour. He explains his dilemma towards his life to Premi. He tells her about his loss of faith in his existence:

We see people die and yet we go on as if we are going to live forever . . . that is the greatest marvel this world holds, it's the miracle. In fact, it is the secret of life itself. We knew it's all there, the pain and suffering, old age, loneliness and death, but we think, somehow, we believe that it is not for us. The day we stop believing in this untruth, the day we face the truth that we too are mortal, that this is our fate as well, it will become difficult, almost impossible to go on . . . it happened to me. I stopped believing. The miracle failed for me and there was nothing left. You've got to be Buddha for the emptiness to be filled with compassion for the world. For me, there was just emptiness. (133-34)

The alienation that Gopal faces may be one of the possible reasons to leave his family. He feels that "All human ties are only a masquerade. Someday, some time, the pretense fails us and we have to face the truth" (52). However, this decision of Gopal leaves Sumi in utmost despair but she is strong enough to conceal her feelings. She doesn't even wish to talk about it to anyone:

. . . What do I say . . . that my husband has left me and I don't know why and maybe he doesn't really know, either? And that I'm angry and humiliated and confused . . . Let that be, we won't go into it now. (107)

Though Sumi comes back to her parents' home, she doesn't accept any kind of financial support neither from her parents nor from her well earning sister. As an independent woman, she takes up a temporary job of teaching and learns to ride a scooter. She does all these at the age of forty; that seems quite praise-worthy. It is to be noticed that other protagonists of Deshpande's novels feel stifled, exhausted, disappointed at their early age, while Sumi is full of optimism and enthusiasm to direct her life without her husband's support. It is at this point that the novel *A Matter of Time* seems to be ahead of other novels. It shows us a change from the previous novels of Deshpande.

Seeing her mother's misery, Sumi's eldest daughter Aru, asks her mother to give divorce to Gopal. She asks her to meet a good lawyer. Aru is revolutionary in her thinking. She thinks that her father should be made aware of his fault. But Sumi rejects her daughter's idea and thinks that seeking divorce from

Gopal will not make her relationship as normal as it was before. She believes that marriage is based on companionship and commitment and once this commitment gets broken, it can never be mended.

Sumi's mother, Kalyani, always wants Sumi to reconcile with Gopal. She cannot tolerate the fact that her married daughter is living with her parents, instead of her husband. At this point, Kalyani behaves like a typical traditional woman for whom the existence of a married woman is at her husband's home. However, it may be noted that Kalyani has been a prey of age old conventions and believes. Her mother, Manorama, was like Saru's mother in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* who made her realize that a woman is always supposed to live a life of subjugation and suppression. Like Saru, she faces discrimination, being a female. She lives a terrified life in her childhood because of her mother. But her trauma doesn't end here. She faces a lot of trouble due to her husband, Shripati, who desires to maintain a dictatorship over his family members. He is a male chauvinist who can't tolerate a woman's independent status. His dominance and dictatorship leaves no space for love and respect in the relationship for Kalyani. She loses her self-respect in her married life and lives a pathetic life as a typical house-wife who is denied her private expression and wishes in her life. She represents those Indian women who are trained to accept drudgery and compromise even in the worst humiliating situations. Deshpande describes her condition: "They don't seem to realize that the real miracle is Kalyani herself, Kalyani who has survived intact in spite of what Shripati did to her. Kalyani who has survived Manorama's myriad acts of cruelty" (151). The conservative society has conditioned her thinking to internalize the idea of her femininity. This, perhaps, is the reason why she tells her daughter to reconcile with Gopal. When Sumi is at her parents' home, she faces a lot of criticism from other women. Shanker's mother says:

"When are you going back to your husband?", the old woman asks abruptly. You should be with him. Look at his state! It's all right to stay with your parent for a while, but that's not your home. When my daughters come home, I don't let them stay long. Go back to you husband, he's a good man. If you've done wrong, he'll forgive you. And if he has – women shouldn't have pride. (161)

These lines very vividly describe the mentality of older women in our patriarchal society who think that women's worth is measured through their marital life only. Shanker's mother advises Sumi to go to her husband even if he is at fault. This gives us a glimpse of the subdued status of women in India. Through the portrayal of Kalyani, Deshpande has focused on the plight of married women who live tortuous lives. Aru gets shocked to hear her grandmother's story which is full of agony and trauma. Even Sumi wonders, "But for many others, this may well be sound arrangement where husband and wife are living together under the same roof even if there is only silence between them" (167). These words of Sumi attack those married couples who wear the façade of a loving husband-wife even though there is no love between them. They are scared of their failure in marriage and, hence, are compelled to wear the mask. Sumi feels unable to understand the meaning of such a life:

Is it enough to have a husband, and never mind the fact that he has not looked at your face for years, never mind if he has not spoken to you for decades? Does this wifehood makeup everything, for the deprivation of a man's love, for the feel of his body against yours, the warmth of his breath on your face . . . Kalyani lost all

this (had she ever had them?) but her kumkum is intact and she can move in the company of women with the pride of a wife. (167)

These lines describe the deprived state of womanhood. But Deshpande has shown a tremendous strength in Sumi who never feels defeated against any odds. She has seen her mother suffering in marriage because there was no compatibility between her father and mother. So when her daughter, Charu is hopeful that one day his father will come and everything will become normal, Sumi doesn't expect anything. Charu asks her whether she will accept Gopal and forgive him, to which she responds rationally:

High and mighty? No, I can never be that. But taking him back. I don't know, Charu that sounds odd to me. As if he's a pet dog who's strayed away or something. No Charu, I am not a good hater. I can never keep it up for long. But even if he comes back, things can never be the way they are, you know that, don't you? (194)

Sumi does not lament her state. She rather tries her best to give all the comforts to her daughters. Her economic independence gives her courage to face her life alone. She doesn't seek pity from anyone. She accepts everything as her fate but in positive manner. She has the courage to go ahead alone in her life that is the biggest strength of Sumi. In her interview with Vimala Rama Rao, Deshpande focuses on her inner strength:

Sumi's acceptance is not passive. She blocks out the unpleasantness. She has a good opinion of herself, she is more concerned with getting on in life. She does not want pity, she would do anything for pride. She distances even her husband. The point is, they are both unusual. People are puzzled by the abandoned wife not feeling bad. (256)

Sumi represents those courageous women who have the spirit of moving on in their life without succumbing to adverse circumstances. She doesn't want to get back to the drudgery of her marital life with her husband. Deshpande seems to suggest again that women themselves can make their life worth living. They just need to go beyond social conditioning and keep asserting themselves. The similar idea has been presented by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*:

Now that education, freedom the right to work on the great human frontiers – all the roads by which men have realized themselves – are open to women, only the shadow of the past enshrined in the mystique of feminine fulfilment keeps women finding their road. (326)

Sumi emerges as a modern woman who transcends the hold of feminine traits on her psyche instead of watering a dead tree (her relationship with Gopal). She rejects the idea of a husband as a sheltering tree. She doesn't want to water it with deceit and lies. She believes in herself more than in her husband. She revives her creativity and writes a play "The Gardner's Son" and it becomes a success. She rejoices and says, "It feels so good and now suddenly I want to do so many things" (231). Deshpande once again talks about female sexuality through Sumi. She looks at the mythical figure of Surpanakha from a new angle. She says:

Female sexuality. We're ashamed of owing it, we can't even speak of it, not even to our own selves. But Surpanakha was not, she spoke of her desires, she flaunted them. And therefore, were the men, unused to such women, frightened? Did they feel threatened by her? I think so. Surpanakha, neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it. (191)

Sumi sees strength in Surpanakha instead of drawbacks. It reflects Sumi's modern outlook that sees man-woman relationship as equal where a woman has as much right to talk about her sexuality as a man has. It proves that Deshpande has written from a woman's point of view.

Sumi dies with her father in an accident when she is on the verge of starting her life afresh. But her death should not be taken as a defeat. Deshpande speaks in her interview with Vimala Rama Rao, "So was I unhappy over Sumi's death, but it just happened; it was not deliberate" (257). Sumi's death does not project the end of the novel. Kalyani comes forward with courage to take responsibility of her granddaughters.

Aru also deserves special mention. Aru is just the opposite of her mother, Sumi. She is a woman who seems to voice the feministic point of view. She has an intense hatred towards men after his father's decision of deserting the family. While Kalyani always makes her understand that "you can't stop living because someone else got hurt" (198). This statement is noteworthy because it comes from Kalyani who has also realized the importance of life. Aru recognizes this and learns to express her hidden emotions and desires. Though Sumi dies, her death brings a drastic change in Kalyani and Aru's personality. Aru makes Gopal realize how he has spoiled their life and now they don't need him anymore. Aru emerges as a more understanding woman who understands her strength. An unusual end of the novel with Sumi's death, the focus gets shifted towards Aru. Deshpande's interview with Prasanna Shree makes it clear. She says:

Certainly, it's tragedy . . . my focus was on Aru. So even if Sumi dies that is not the end. Life goes on, there is Aru who is going to flower and who is really going to become something, which is going to be remarkable. I see a future for Aru . . . so Aru for me is a kind of healing touch – Aru's growth, Aru's future. (153)

Deshpande has portrayed a new world for women where she is aware of changes taking place. At the end, *A Matter of Time* assertively speaks about the independence of women and acknowledgement of their rights.

References

- 1 Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1980. Print.
- 2 Deshpande, Shashi. *A Matter of Time*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996. Print.
- 3 De Beauvoir, Simon, *The Second Sex*. Trans. And ed. H.M. Parshley, New York: Vintage Books, 1974. Print.
- 4 Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Laurel, 1984. Print.
- 5 Prasanna Sree, S. "In Conversation with Shashi Deshpande". *Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande: A Study*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2003, Print.