



**CONSERVATIVE SOCIETY CAUSES WOMEN'S LIFE MISERABLE: A STUDY OF SHASHI
DESHPANDE'S A MATTER OF TIME**

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ABSTRACT:

All the women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's novels are educated and sensitive. The most important problem of their lives is that they are not allowed to lead their lives with their own identities. Before marriage, they get second-rate treatment at their parental families and after marriage, they are taken for granted to be meek and submissive wives. On the whole, they are considered inferior human beings even though they are highly educated and have professional career. Sumi, the protagonist of A Matter of Time, is deserted by her husband after twenty-three years of their marriage without any definite reason. She is forced to experience the agony of a deserted wife and an isolated partner. The faults and frailties of patriarchy make her life full of odds and ordeals. She has to start a fresh life at the age of forty and is doomed to die.

KEYWORDS: *Patriarchy, Desertion, Bonds and Bondages, Familial Relationship, Desolation, Invisible Chains.*

INTRODUCTION :

The counts and claims of changes and developments in respect to women in general Indian women in particular seem to be meretricious. The reality is different and it tells the saga of how women are rapped and sapped by an unhealthy socio-economic and political architecture. Everyday, we come across the news regarding the cases of rape, torture and sexual harassment, dowry and domestic violence against women, child marriages and *Sati*. The reports of censuses claim that the ratio of women to men has come down drastically. The health surveys show the growing practice of female feticide, high girl-child mortality rate, deprivation of proper medical facilities to pregnant and child-bearing women, and so on and so forth.

Women are supposed to "secure a complete equality with men in the enjoyment of all human rights—moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic and so on."¹ However, some changes are discernible in the attitude of women. They have got an access to education and an exposure outside the family. They tend to realize themselves as individuals and their importance is not less than that of their male-counterparts. The horizon of Indian

woman's scope has extended beyond the confines of her home and family. She dares to question her subordination and inferior status.

A host of women novelists including Shashi Deshpande are piloting the trend of making women as well as society conscious regarding the innumerable man-made cancers by which women are being thrust into the drab and drudgery of exploitation. Women in Shashi Deshpande's novels feel suffocated in the restricted bonds and bounds of the tradition where woman is considered as an appendage to man. So they come out of this unscrupulous environment to stamp their own identities. Subsequently, they find their own weaknesses and deficiencies in one hand, and the society's inhibitions on the other. Kamini Dinesh, appraising the condition of Shashi Deshpande's protagonists, says:

Working outside the tradition of purdah as specified in the households where there are architectural divisions into the 'zenana' and the 'mardana' or the physically cloistered woman, Deshpande focuses on the emotionally cloistered woman who struggles to shade her inhibitions and the subordinated self.²

Sumi, the protagonist of *A Matter of Time*, deals with entirely a different sort of crisis which is forced on her after twenty-three years of smooth-going married life. So the merits and demerits of her personality come to the fore when she is forty having three grown-up daughters. Her husband Gopal deserts her and their daughters without any intimation. That leaves them in a perilous condition—the cross road of what-to-do and what-not-to-do. This novel “also explores the issue of consolidation of the female identity in the larger context of modern society and ponders over the realities of common human existence.”³

A Matter of Time centres around family relationship. In conversation with Geetha Gangadharan, Shashi Deshpande admits:

Undoubtedly my novels are all about family relationship...But surely, when I am writing about the family, it is not just about the family. It definitely does not limit my canvas. On the contrary, that is where everything begins.⁴

It is a novel of human bonds and bondages pertaining to family. Sumi, the protagonist of the novel, has been right from her childhood “Beautiful, graceful, effortlessly, almost without wanting to, gathering friends around herself.”⁵ She is different from Saru, Indu, Jaya and Urmila, the women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's earlier novels.

Sumi's married life collapses as Gopal, her husband—a history lecturer in a local college, without having any articulated reasons, deserts her almost after twenty-three years of their marriage and unburdens his responsibilities as husband and father of three grown up children. But, she is cool and self-controlled as she tells Devaki:

I've never been able to cry easily, you know that. And what do I say, Devi? 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. (MT 107)

Shashi Deshpande contrives Sumi to evolve herself from the utter desolation and bitterness linked up with invisible chains of patriarchal pressure and other family responsibilities. And she is sure that the financial as well as social independence without trampling the familial bonds is the real greatness and achievement of Indian women. In a conversation with Vanmala Viswanatha, Shashi Deshpande affirms:

It is necessary for women to live within relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother you do this and no further, then one becomes unhappy. This is what I have tried to convey in my writing.⁶

The novel is "more deeply involved in the relationship of husband and wife than any of Sashi Deshpande's other novels"⁷. The failed marriage of Sumi and Gopal is kept at the centre. Descriptions of other marriages like Sumi's sister Premi's marriage, Gopal's nephew Ramesh's marriage, the marriage of Sumi's mother, Kalyani, and her grandmother, Manorama, her aunt, Doda, and the young love relationship of her own two older daughters, Aru and Charu are also reflected.

"The questions that are raised in the process of examining these relationships are multifarious.... But all of them have invariably inclined to scrutinize the institution of marriage."⁸The novel throws light on three generations and tips an intimation of the hovering fourth one. Though the novel ends with the tragic death of Sumi, it articulates the changes concerned with socio-cultural value structures. Moreover, the novelist herself has a soft corner for this novel as she writes:

Nevertheless, I have a soft corner for *A Matter of Time*, mainly because I sense mellowness in it. The raw anger of my four earlier novels is no longer there. And more than this, it is the note of compassion in this novel that endears it to me, the compassion that is there in Sumi's understanding of Gopal, in Aru's final 'I'm your son, Amma' to Kalyani, Kalyani whom she had begun by judging harshly....There are a few firsts about this novel which mark it out for me...I moved out of Bombay to Bangalore...I moved away from first person narration. Some parts were in the first person and the voice here was Gopal's. I had never used a male voice this way before.⁹

Life is all about knowing oneself and this in itself is a journey. What sets a human being apart from the other living beings is his higher sense of spirituality, rationality and perceptibility. Shashi Deshpande's women undertake their journeys with a nobler sense of purpose. Their quest for identity and independence have been muddled and marred by their own weaknesses and complexes, and by our social set-up. "The women are particularly caught in the process of redefining and rediscovering their own roles, position and relationship within their given social world".¹⁰

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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5. Shashi Deshpande, *A Matter of Time* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 104. All subsequent references to this novel are given parenthetically with abbreviation as MT and the concerned page numbers.
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