
Theme of Silent Suffering Married Women in the Contemporary Indian Society Described in Deshpande's Novel A Matter of Time

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Abstract

Since the dawn of civilisation our society has ever been male oriented and masculine dominated. The novels of Shashi Deshpande are not exceptions because here too male characters are presented and described as dominant figures but female characters have very wisely made their place and bound them either to make compromises or live their lives happily with them.

A Matter of Time (1996), is the seventh novel written by Shashi Deshpande. In this novel, it is for the first time that Deshpande makes an effort to highlight a male protagonist, Gopal. This novel has a fascinating story of three strong women representing three generations in the family. This is a story of their pains, endurance, suffering, love, understanding and support extended to one another. Sumi and Gopal had a love marriage and now have three young daughters - Aru, Charu and Sumi. At the opening of the novel, Gopal enters house and tells Sumi that he is leaving the house. Sumi does not know what to say and he goes out as quietly as he had come in. The next morning, Sumi tells her daughters about it, almost exactly repeating Gopal's words, leaving out nothing. Sumi, though immensely hurt by Gopal's action, endures the pains within herself and tries to keep the things normal for her daughters. And yet Sumi, despite her facade of normality, has a quality about her — a kind of blankness — that makes them uneasy.

Shripati, Sumi's father, takes them to 'Big-House', her parental home. Kalyani, her mother is shattered to know about it. Gopal's desertion is not just a tragedy, it is both a shame and a disgrace. Sumi is trying to endure the pains and humiliation 'wordlessly'. For family and friends, there is an awkwardness about the whole thing, and discomfort and uneasiness pervade more than grief and anger. They don't find, the right way dealing with her apparent stoicism. They are puzzled by her self-control. Sumi appears to be an epitome of silent suffering and passive resistance. But, the novelist feels, she made of different stuff. She blocks out the unpleasantness. She has a good opinion of herself, she more concerned with getting on with the life. She does not want pity; she would do anything for pride. Even her daughters are puzzled and intrigued and, in a way, angered and hurt by her 'stoicism'. They want to share the pains, loss and

hurt which seem to be impossible with Sumi. When Devi cries and tells Sumi, "Maybe I am crying because you don't. You don't even talk about it."

The novel ends on a tragic note with the sudden death of Sumi and her father, Shripati in a road accident. Thus, this is a male oriented novel where a male, character Gopal dominates another female character.

Key Words- Theme of Silent Suffering Married Women, Contemporary Indian Society, Described in Deshpande's Novel.

Introduction

It is for the first time that Shashi Deshpande makes an effort to highlight a male protagonist, Gopal. Deshpande in her seventh novel **A Matter of Time** (1996) has presented a fascinating story of three strong women representing three generations in the family. This is the story of their pains, endurance, suffering, love, understanding and support extended to one another. Y.S. Sunita Reddy aptly remarks that "Shashi Deshpande, who has earned a niche for herself in articulating the bitterness and desolation of her women characters in her novels, enters for the first time into a broader arena and grapples with the complex theme of alienation in her novel, A Matter of Time."¹ The novel revolves around an urban, middle-class family of Gopal - a university history teacher. As the rest of her novels are based on middle class family relationship so is this one also. Shashi Deshpande herself says:

Undoubtedly my novels are all about family relationships. But... I go beyond that because the relationships which exist within the family are, to an extent parallel to the relationships which exist between human beings outside... 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 she is where everything begins."²

The novel opens with three generations of women. The first generation's representative is Kalyani, the grandmother; the second generation's is Sumitra called Sumi; and the third is represented by Arundhati, the daughter of Sumi called Aru. But ironically, it is Gopal, Sumi's husband, who emerges to be a more fully realized character than any of these women in the novel. This is the story of their pains, endurance, suffering and love, understanding and support extended to one another. Sumi and Gopal had love marriage and now have three young daughters - Aru, Charu and Seema. At the opening of the novel, Gopal enters house and tells Sumi that he is leaving the house - called Vishwas. Sumi does not know what to say and "he goes out as quietly as she had come in." (9) As she was watching the movie, continues to watch until the end, when the clown, tragic, doomed victim, dies. She goes to bed

with song still going on in head, the slightly off-key voice of Mukesh singing "Jena yahan, Marna yahan", the nimble feet of the clown dancing to its tune. Hearing the song, she feels that, "as if this is all there at present to trouble her, her mind puzzles over the meaning of the words": "What do they mean?" Her mind slides from one interpretation to another, over and over again, until in sheer exhaustion she falls asleep. She gets up at three in the morning and finds herself alone in bed, the pillow by her side cold and smooth the other half of the bed. Finally, she finds out that, "it is true what Gopal, told her, he meant it, he has already done it." (9)

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Having reached this conclusion, she lies still, waiting for the dawn. Now, her mind is crystal like clear, she knows what has happened. Next morning, she gets out of bed, wash, make tea for all of them and go into her daughter's room to tell them what has happened, "She tells them about it almost exactly repeating Gopal's words, leaving out nothing". (9) In the words of R.S. Pathak, "Sumi appears to be an epitome of silent suffering and passive resistance. But, the novelist feels, she is made of different stuff. "She blocks out the unpleasantness.

She has a good opinion of herself, she more concerned with getting on with life. She does not want pity; she would do anything for pride. "She distances even her husband."³

Sumi, though immensely hurt by Gopal's action, endures the pain within herself and tries to keep the things normal for her daughters. And yet "Sumi, despite her facade of normality, has a quality about her - a kind a blankness -that makes them uneasy." (10-11) Her two older daughters feel that they should do something, but they do not know what it is they can do. They are waiting for a lead from their mother, but she gives them none.

Next morning Shripati, Sumi's father, takes them to 'Big House', her parental home. Kalyani, her mother shattered to know about it. "Gopal's desertion is not just a tragedy, it is both a shame and a disgrace." (13) Pramod K. Nayar comments on their separation, "It is an interesting interior monologue follows Sumi's break up with Gopal. Sumi is anguished but cannot speak of her agony since it would trouble her mother Kalyani. Kalyani asks her: "Why do you want to be alone.?" Sumi thinks to herself: "It takes time to get used to sharing your life with another person, now I have to get used to being alone."⁴ Sumi is trying to endure the pains and humiliation 'wordlessly'. For family and friends, "There is an awkwardness about the whole thing and discomfort and uneasiness pervade more than grief and anger." (20) The reason for this is: "Sumi the person they come to comfort, is an enigma. She accepts

Gopal's dumb sympathy, Devaki's fierce loyalty and Ramesh's stupefied bewilderment, as if they are all the same to her." (20) They don't find, "the right way to dealing with her apparent stoicism." (20) They are puzzled by her self-control. Even her daughters are puzzled and intrigued and, in a way, angered and hurt by her, 'stoicism'. They want to share the pain, loss and hurt which seems to be impossible with Sumi. When Devi cries and tells Sumi, "Maybe I am crying because you don't. You don't even talk about it, "for the first time Sumi puts her pains in words, "I have 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 confused...? Let that be, we won't go into it now.'" (107) We also notice that there is no obvious we won't reason for Gopal walking out on his family. This clearly established by the pathetic probing by Kalyani, Sumi's mother, who takes it upon herself to plead with her son-in-law to return home. But Sumi feels a sense of alienation. She feels hurt at the thought of her daughters blaming her for Gopal's action. "Do my daughters blame me for what Gopal has done? Do they think it is my fault? Why can't I open my heart to them?" (23) Sumi, in fact, is trying to cope with the reality, trying to come to terms with the hard, painful reality, trying to come to terms with the hard, painful reality and wants her daughters to do the same. When her daughters are worried about his being dead or alive. "Sumi has no fears of his death, on the contrary, there is the certainty of his being alive of his steadily pursuing his own purposes. While the others are trying to find reasons for what he has done, she knows that the reason lies inside him, the reason is him." She also remembers the night she had gone to his room, knowing that only this way could she break out of her father's authority. But Gopal, to her consternation, had closed himself against her. "Go back Sumi,' he had said, almost coldly". (24) And yet Sumi has her own question to ask Gopal. Without blaming Gopal, she is curious to know, how he has taken the decision to disown things and people in this age of 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 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. 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 to this?" (27).

Gopal's desertion affects Sumi's body and soul. She tries hard to survive through it, but the change in her is visible: "With Gopal's going, it was as if the swift flowing stream of her being had grown thick and viscous - her movement, her thoughts, her very pulse and heartbeats seemed to have slowed down. It had worried her family, but it had been a necessary physical reaction to her emotional state, as if this slowing down was essential for survival." (28) Her world becomes meaningless now but she wants her

daughters' life to be full of happiness. She herself says, "I want her to enjoy the good things in life, want her to taste life. I want her to relish it and not spit it out because she finds it bitter." (220).

Another important thing about Sumi is her ability to relate herself to the world. After Gopal's walking away she writes a play entitled "The Gardener's son" and proposes to write another. "It feels so good," she admits. "And now suddenly I want to do so many things" (231). She also wanted to rewrite the story of Surpanakha from an original point of view:

Female sexuality. We are ashamed of owning it, we cannot 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 about.⁵ - it is this Surpanakha I'm going to write about.

This above revision of the Surpanakha episode speaks of Sumi's ability and deep thought. It is a pity that Sumi dies of an accident suddenly, just before her taking up a job to support herself and her daughters.

Sumi's daughters, "Aru, Charu, Seema give the impression of having taken up the threads of their life." in the Big House. (23) Still Sumi is one who has the air of being lost, of having no place in her childhood home.'(23) Gopal's leaving has created a vast void in her. In her own words, "his absence has left such a vast emptiness that I cannot find my bearings, there are no makers anymore to show me which way I should go."

Aru, Sumi's elder daughter, is so upset and angry with her father that she wants Sumi to file a case against Gopal. Sumi disagrees and tells Aru, "I just want to get on with my life." (61) She puts an arm around Aru's shoulder: "Let him go, Aru, just let him go. This is not good for you." She also opposes Aru saying, "By punishing him do you want to punish him. I don't. I am not interested. I just want to get on with my life." (61) With these words, she allows Gopal to have his own space, to implement on his own decisions, to free himself from the bondage of love as he needs this freedom. Y.S. Sumita Reddy aptly remarks that "Sumi's silence as, "Sumi copes quite admirably with the humiliation and disgrace of being a deserted wife. She does not save and rant but surrounds herself with a deathlike silence. Her very silence, however conveys her pains more effectively than words can."⁶ Reddy also adds that, " In a manner quite similar to that of her counterparts, Indu, Saru, Jaya and Urmi, in Deshpande's earlier novels, Sumi reveals an independent nature. She refuses to accept financial help from her well placed

parents, her doctor sister or Gopal's ever-helpful doctor nephew, Ramesh. She insists on taking up a temporary teaching post at once and is actively on the lookout for a permanent job.

With great determination, she learns to ride two wheelers, at her age, much to the amusement of her children and the anxiety of her mother, she frantically searches for a house to move into, unwilling to stay on in her parents' house, but given up only when she is convinced of the impracticality of moving out of the 'Big House' which has ample space for her family into an expensive and congested apartment. She gently spurs the efforts made by her friend and cousins, Devaki. She also makes it a point to inform Gopal that she has in no way encouraged their daughter, Aru, who is obsessed with the idea of suing her father for maintenance. Her pride refuses to allow her to show her grief to Gopal or request him to return home."⁷

As the novel proceeds we read that Sumi understands her young daughter's desperate need of the warmth and togetherness of family and yet she sets Gopal free without any complaint speaks volumes of her courage and understanding. Earlier Aru - the heroine of the novel became rebellious. The "desire to rebel" is deeply ingrained in her."(11) Her reaction to her mother's stoic acceptance of it is "violent and sharp" (21). Aru's "hostility" is like "a weapon" of "an adversary" (49). She is no longer interested in Gopal's answer, but she will not let him "get away scott-free" (137). She is painted by the disintegration of the family, but her self-respect would not let her stoop to self-pity. In this way Sumi succeeds in motivating her daughter's mind in developing a good thinking about Gopal. In the words of Suvarna Shinde, "This understanding between Gopal and Sumi makes their relationship a unique one is Deshpande's fictional world. All the man woman relationships in her novels are oppressive, strange, uncomfortable or silence. Sumi and Gopal stand out uniquely in spite of the fact that Gopal leaves them for something unattainable."⁸

Right from her childhood Sumi has been "Beautiful graceful, effortlessly, almost without wanting to gather friends around her." (104) When she meets Gopal, for the first time after their separation, there are no tears, no abuses, no questions or explanations. When Sumi enters his room, Gopal is having his lunch and reading a book of poems. Asking Sumi to wait, he goes out to wash his hands. When she is looking out of the window into the courtyard, "She hears his voice. He is responding to someone, perhaps a servant woman, offering to wash up for him. The children call out to him and she hears him laugh. And, as if his voice knits everything together, she can suddenly see the substance, the reality of his life apart from her and their children. All these lives, contiguous to his, spell out the actuality of their separation." (84-85). She says to him that, it occurs to her with its finality that "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 wife has moved on, it will go on without me. So has mine. Our lives have diverged, they now move separately." (85).

This 'reality' dawns upon her without even any exchange of words. And Sumi understands and accepts it. Shashi Deshpande comments: "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 with life. She does not want pity; she would do anything for pride. She distances even her husband. The point is they are both unusual."⁹

The novel also tells the story of Kalyani. thirty old years of silence in marriage of Kalyani and Shripati, Sumi's parents, is at the centre of this novel. Kalyani was an intelligent girl and was often playful told by her father that she would become the country's first engineer. She was, however, not allowed to even complete her schooling and instead was married off to her maternal uncle, Shripati, according to her mother's wishes.

Kalyani's mother, Manorama, is obsessed with the fear of her husband taking up another wife as she could not produce a male heir to their property and she does not even relish the idea of Kalyani marrying into a new family, as the property would then belong to them. Hence her desire that her only child, Kalyani, should marry her brother, Shripati. As time passes of Kalyani and Shripati three children born. The last one, who is a boy, Madhav is mentally retarded.

The tragedy strikes Kalyani when her four-year-old son gets lost at a railway platform as she is waiting to board the train to Bangalore. Shripati cannot forgive his wife for her negligence and sends her back to her parents' house with her two remaining children, Sumi and Premi. It is only on her death bed that Manorama is able to prevail upon her brother to return and live in the 'Big House' with his wife and daughters. He obliges her but continues to maintain a story silence with his wife. The enormous cruelty of it, apparently, does not cause as much concern as it would have, if, perhaps, Shripati had forsaken his wife or she had died. On hearing her grandparents' story, Aru, is shocked at her grandmother's acceptance of such a life: "And when Kalyani signs her name, carefully spelling out "Kalyani bai Pandit,' Aru is amazed. How can she still have his name for god's sake?" (146) At times Sumi too wonders: "But for many others this way well be a sound arrangement where husband and wife are living together under the same roof even if there is only silence between them. "Sumi recalls Shankar's mother's words "what is a woman without a husband?" (167) Sumi is unable to comprehend the meaning of such an existence. She thinks:

"It is enough to have a husband and never mind the fact that he has not looked at your face for years, never mind the fact that he has not spoken to you for decades? Does this wifhood make up for 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, the touch of his lips on yours, his hands on your breast? 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.¹⁰

Later Kalyani is keen on getting a good match for her granddaughter Aru, though they are "amazed" by her unusual interest in marriage, which was responsible for her own misfortunes: "How can she of all people, think of marriage with enthusiasm?" (124).

Aru, the eldest daughter of Sumi and Gopal is very disturbed by the 'queer' relationship between her grandparents, not only accepts them but relates herself to Kalyani and her past. As Sumi under stands at a later stage: "We have a very complex relationship with the past. Whether we are resisting it, reliving it, ignoring it, or trying to recreate it all these things often at the same time - We are always, in some way, trying to reshape it to our desires." (100) And "The truth perhaps, is that whatever we do, we are always giving the past a place in our lives." (100) She is endowed with an "innate sense of order" (12) Since the beginning of her life she has been a creative and an intelligent daughter. In the novel Aru is surprised to learn from lawyer/activist friend Surekha about the totally unfair system which had been in force in our country since time immemorial until recently. Aru, who plans to sue her father for maintenance, comes to Surekha for help. Surekha then tells: "You are lucky to be living now. Do you know that Manu doesn't mention any duty to maintains a daughter? The duty is towards a wife, parents and sons." (204). At the final stage of the novel Aru succeeds in motivating her father's mood silently. Gopal himself expresses his emotions as a father:

But I glimpsed it even then, the truth that would soon confront me, I saw it when Sumi put the baby to her breast. For I knew, when I looked at them, that they belonged together as I never did.

Even when Sumi was impatient, when she showed a flash of temper as she often did for being deprived of her sleep, they were together in that magic circle. Woman and child. And I was outside, A man is always an outsider.

I envied Sumi for this. And for this too: for a woman, from the moment she is pregnant, there is an overriding reason for living, a justification for life that is loudly and emphatically true. A man has to search for it, always and forever.¹¹

The same feelings are reinforced by Gopal in response to Shankar who expresses his inability to protect his wife from his mother's sharp tongue saying, "She gave me birth, she brought me up, she looked after me', (216) Gopal understands his dilemma and observes:

That is a debt we can never repay; it is a burden we can never lay down. Women will never understand this, they don't need to, they are luckier: the day they become mothers themselves, they have repaid their debt, they are unburdened and free. What is fatherhood set against this weight, this certainty of motherhood?¹²

Jasbir Jain comments that "in '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 clean and purify. It is also about the stream of life which flows."¹³ Further, she says, Deshpande's "novels are not about woman but social institutions and the nature of freedom.... Freedom, when it comes, brings with it its own burden. Gopal is aware that Sumi by not bringing in any legal action against him is giving him his freedom while at the same time learning to build a sense of freedom for herself¹⁴ (40-41).

The novel ends on a tragic note with the sudden deaths of Sumi and her father, Shripati, in a road accident. The whole story presents three generations of Kalyani, Sumi and Aru. Gopal, belonging to male community, is for the first time described as a round male character by Deshpande. N. Poovalingam aptly remarks that, "One feels that, after all, Shashi Deshpande has succeeded in creating a male character which stands by itself and not as a prop to uphold the female protagonist."¹⁵

Thus, although A Matter of Time has a male protagonist, Deshpande's focus remains on female characters. Three women characters Kalyani, Sumi and Aru - however emerge in the novel that attract our attention. The images of Kalyani and Sumi are those of silent, suffering but non-submissive women. However, the image of Aru belonging to the third generation is different. She is a persuasive girl who is keen only to bring about a reconciliation between her parents. As in her earlier novels, Deshpande in A Matter of Time as well does not deviate from her commitment to display her concern for silent suffering married women in our contemporary Indian society.

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