

## Untold Saga of Victimized Women of *A Matter of Time* of Shashi Deshpande

\*Dr. Chhayababen Narayanbhai Vankar  
[M.A, B.Ed., Ph.D]

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#### \*Corresponding Author

Email: asha25490[at]gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

*In the present paper, the attempt has been made to look into the plight and pathos of victimized women of A Matter of Time. Shashi Deshpande's women characters suffer from many struggle and pains in the male dominated society. A Matter of Time deals with the human predicament of three women representing three generations of the same family. This novel portrays the picture of a lady, namely, Sumi, who is not exploited by her husband directly, but she suffers due to sudden and selfish escape of her husband, Gopal, leaving all responsibilities of the family upon her shoulders.*

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### INTRODUCTION

*A Matter of Time* is Deshpande's seventh novel, published by Penguin, India, in 1996 and by the Feminist Press, New York, in 1999. The present novel centering on three generations of women living together in an ancestral home almost to the near exclusion of men, it marked a new phase in Deshpande's literary career. She said that she was 'very confident of this book. It [was] written for [that] stage of my life.' Deshpande said that *A Matter of Time* was her favourite book because of her deep understanding and closeness to the characters.

### VICTIMIZED WOMEN OF A MATTER OF TIME

The women's status and position in the male dominated Indian society is very much precarious. The women's conditions especially in the lower section of the society are more vulnerable due to lack of education and social consciousness. The compulsion before them is to\* keep-their marriage intact. They are taught from the beginning that the husband is the 'sheltering tree', 'symbol of kumkwri' and protector of 'mangalsutra'. Shashi Deshpande, a novelist of deep insight, observes the problems of the Indian women and reflects that through her novel, *A Matter of Time*, which portrays the picture of the women who despite intolerable torture and vulnerable negligence of their husbands remain silent forever.

*A Matter of Time* deals with the human predicament of three women representing three generations of the same family. This novel of Deshpande is different from her other novels in the sense that it is related not only to feminism but also to a man, the protagonist of the novel. Being a realist, the novelist has depicted the weaknesses and shortcomings of both the males and females. However, as usual her attention has gone much to the pain, agony, suffering and endurance of married women in this novel also. It is all because Deshpande champions the cause of the Indian women who are the subjects of suppression, exploitation, victimization and negligence even among the family members. Her concern has been to expose the sufferings of women in the hands of their own family

members including their husbands. This novel also portrays the picture of a lady, namely, Sumi, who is not exploited by her husband directly, but she suffers due to sudden and selfish escape of her husband, Gopal, leaving all responsibilities of the family upon her shoulders.

The novel moves round an urban middle class family of Gopal and Sumi with their three daughters: Am, Cham and Seema. Sumi is the protagonist who has the quality to bear the adverse circumstances maintaining long silence and without complaining against anyone. Gopal, husband of Sumi, maintains cordial relations with his wife and daughters so long as he lives with them, but he deserts them suddenly for the reason which is known to none, even not to Gopal. Among the daughters Aru is the eldest one who proves herself more intelligent, wise and dutiful towards her whole family including her grand-father and grand-mother.

Sumi, an educated lady, who is matured enough to know the reality of life and truth of the world, is prepared to face any reverse situation without any complaint to anybody. Knowing from Gopal that he is leaving the family, she does not stop him. Rather she interprets Mukesh's philosophic song 'jeena yahan, mama yahan, esse siwa jana kahan' (to live here and die here as there is no place to go anywhere), which she hears from the T.V. She thinks:

This world is all we have and therefore there is nowhere else for us to go. Or does it mean, this is what we have; this area of action is enough for us, we live here and die here, we need no more. (MT 9)

Shashi Deshpande knows well that the world in which all creatures live is a puzzle. No one can find emersion. But the truth which is visible is that one has to live whether the life is pleasant or unpleasant, happy or unhappy, full of pleasures or displeasure. One is bound to live because there is no escape. The endless circle of life continues even after the death of the creatures in this world. One comes and goes, but the continuity of existence of life remains intact. Sumi, perhaps, tries to know the same truth while interpreting Mukesh's song.

After Gopal's desertion Shripati, Sumi's father, brings them to 'Big House', their parental home. For Kalyani, Sumi's mother, it's not only a great tragedy, but also a matter of shame and disgrace. She gives a poignant cry, "No, no my God, not again." She begins to sound so much "like an animal" (MT 12).

For Sumi, her grief, anger and humiliation are so deep that although she remains calm and composed outwardly, but inwardly she is very restless. She becomes an enigma for her parents, sisters and cousins. When the relatives, hearing such incident, visit her and try to console her, "She accepts Goda's dumb sympathy, Devaki's fierce loyalty and Ramesh's stupefied bewilderment as if they are all sane to her" (MT 20).

They all fail to deal with her apparent stoicism. As the days advance, her daughters seem to have taken up the threads of their life in the Big House, but Sumi remains totally lost and confused even in her childhood home with proper care of her parents and relatives. She confesses that Gopal's walking out has left such a void that she cannot find her bearings and there are no markers to show her the way which she should follow. The incident had affected her body and soul. Shashi Deshpande writes:

With Gopal's going it was as if the swift-flowing stream of her being had grown thick and viscous - her movements, her thoughts, her very y-he and heartbeats seemed to have slowed down. It had worried her family. (MT 28)

For Sumi's daughters the situation is embarrassing as well as hurting because their father is not with them and the mother is silent. Each movement at the door makes them feel that Gopal has returned, but Sumi, unlike her daughters, has no fear of his death. She is sure that Gopal is living somewhere. The biggest question that comes to her mind is why her husband has left them. Sumi has no answer of that 'why' except that she is not responsible for her husband's escape. She remembers Gopal's saying:

"We are shaped by the age we live in, by the society we are part of." She feels to ask him: "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?" (MT 27)

Gopal's walk out is an enigma even to Gopal himself. He thinks, "Why did I marry Sumi? Because I met her - it's as simple as that" (MT 65-66).

The marriage of Gopal was not conventional, but love marriage. Moreover, it cannot be said to be incompatible as their first physical consummation is fulfilling and gratifying to both of them. Here Deshpande does not assign any tenable reason for Gopal's desertion and the readers remain in the dark as to his motive behind his apparently seeming mindless act.

Sudden desertion of Gopal and that also without any weakness or shortcoming of his wife and his children is, in fact, a big gap on the part of educated Gopal. Deshpande is alive to the fact that in the patriarchal Indian society the responsibility to look after the well-being of the family is the major responsibility of the husband. A husband having three children

has no moral right to leave them alone at the career making stage. No husband has the moral right to even to go for saintly life at the cost of his wife's and children's sufferings. The act of Gopal cannot be justified at all. What he did under any circumstance is not acceptable. Rather it may be called cowardice act.

Sumi is a lady who has the commitment to live for her children and also stamina to work for them. After Gopal's walk out, Sumi without any complaint and any sign of distress soon assumes the responsibility as the family guardian. When she is asked by Deviki why she does not cry for the happening that happened to her, Sumi expresses her sense of great humiliation and loss. She says to Deviki:

"What do I say Devi? That my husband has left me and I don't know why and may be he doesn't really know, either. And that I'm angry and humiliated and confused." (MT 107).

She is courageous enough to endure the fate and fight with the adverse circumstances. Hence, she becomes more alert and active so that daughters who need parental care should not suffer. Sumi allows the children no time for melancholy or nostalgia. She sets to work almost immediately and the girls follow. She learns even to ride the scooter.

Gopal's sudden desertion is a matter of great worry to Sumi's mother, sisters and cousins, but to Sumi the crisis that takes place suddenly makes her bolder and tougher. She assumes great inner-strength and self-respecting character. She is determined to face the life with all her strength and power. She stoically accepts the humiliation and disgrace of deserted wife. She raises no fuss over it and lapses into a stone. Her close relatives, with a sense of sympathy, come ahead to provide her financial assistance, but her self-respecting character does not allow her to accept the offer. She manages to get a temporary teaching job. Not only that but she is against staying at spacious home of her father. So, she tries her best to search for a new house on rent for herself and her children. She does not show any sign of disgrace and does not run after anyone to get any kind of assistance. She has no grudge against Gopal. When she comes to know about the living place of Gopal, she does not go to persuade him to come back and join the family. Rather she leaves him free and allows him to follow his course of life as per his willingness. Am, her eldest daughter, thinks of pursuing her father, but Sumi prohibits her from going to her.

Gopal who has no intention of making a mystery of his whereabouts and lives a few miles away from his family members with a student of his own. Ramesh, a close relative of Sumi, traces him out. Gopal knows that while meeting Ramesh, he will have to answer many of his questions. But he finds no suitable answer to satisfy Ramesh. The question "why I left my home, my wife and children" is so arduous to him that he cannot find a suitable answer. He admits that he has not been fair to Sumi. The realization comes to him that he should have spoken to her earlier or he should have given her some hint of what was happening to him. He searches for the answer in his past life. He remembers that he lost his father when he was only eight years old. It was his sister, Sudha, who captured the property of his father. However, he never forgot his father and remembers even today in his dream. He is ashamed of the guilt of his father who had married his brother's widow who became

his mother. He knew all that when he read Hamlet. Now he compares himself with Hamlet:

In this story my father became a man succumbing to his passion for his brother's wife, the woman complaint, a pregnancy and a child to come and then, after the husband's convenient death, a marriage of convenience. (MT 43)

While Gopal's father was alive, he was unable to relate himself as he considered him as his mother's guilty partner. Later on, their death leaves a sense of great void in his life! He gets completely shattered at the realization that his sister Sudha and he did not share the same father. He took it "as a betrayal that cut away at the foundation of my life." It makes it clear that Gopal has been nurturing a sense of alienation and loneliness since his childhood. He reflects, "All human ties are only a masquerade. Someday, some time, the pretence fails us and we have to face the truth" (MT 52).

It is, perhaps, this realization of Gopal that had weakened his interest in the family and the world. It was a sense of humiliation and disappointment from his childhood that led him to his walking out from his family. However, the novelist does not suggest any reason for his renunciation. The feeling that his mother was forcibly married to the real brother of his father when he was in the womb of his mother may be the hidden cause of his sadness and melancholy in his life. The volcano, which was burning inside Gopal, erupted soon after the students' attack and insult upon him in the college for the article which he wrote. He expresses, "My father was never father to me-not after I knew their story. He was Sudha's uncle, her step-father; he was my mother's husband" (TM 43).

Anyway, when he married Sumi, he was satisfied with her and his children as he accepts himself. He says:

After years of blundering I had found the truth in my feelings for Sumi, my love for my children. But now I know I had only lust myself in that beautiful, dense green foliage (TM 168).

Aru asks her father to change his mind and return to family assuming the responsibility. However, Gopal who has made up his mind to follow the course of action what he has decided, is not ready to realize his act and change his mind. However, the question put to him by his own daughter penetrates deep into Gopal's mind and compels him to find out the answer after the departure of Aru from his room. He thinks whether it is all fate as Kalyani believes that the root cause of all happenings is fate. Everything is predestined. So he thinks that what happened in his life from the very beginning and his marriage with Sumi and his desertion may be the result of his destiny. Such thinking may give some sort of consolation to Gopal, but the reality is that such idea comes to Gopal out of utter confusion. He confesses that he is not Yuddhista who can give right answer to the Yaksha's questions. Feelings come to Gopal that, "Marriage is a lifetime commitment - is not possible for all of us" (MT 69).

Sumi is a female character, self-respecting lady and having strong will to move ahead independently. The adverse circumstance, through which she has to pass now, has made her more determined and self-respectful. She is not a lady character who can fight with her husband and pressurize him to share the

responsibility. She knows that everyone has a mind to decide what to do and every one shall have to face the consequences of his/her decision and acts. Her feeling of self-respect is so great that she denies to accept money offered to her by Ramesh as a share of parental property. She says to Ramesh:

I have begun to think that what Gopal has really done is to take sanyas. I'm surprised none of you have thought of that. But look what has happened, it is not he who's going around with the beg-ging bowl, it's I who am doing that (MT 123).

Sumi, along with her youngest daughter, Seema, meets Gopal second time where she happens to meet Manju, Shankar's wife in whose home Gopal is staying. Sumi's purpose to meet Gopal is not to persuade him to come back, but to fulfill Seema's desire to see her father.

Deshpande is of the view that the Indian women are such that they are always ready to live with their husbands even at the cost of their self-respect. The husbands of such women are lucky enough to be proud of their wives while the latter are compelled to rely upon the mercy of their husbands. If there is any family feud, the wife should come ahead for apology even for the wrong cause. Manju's mother-in-law represents such type of the Indian women. So she suggests Sumi for her good sake to return to her husband by tendering apology. Since Gopal is good by nature even after relinquishing his duties towards his family, he will forgive her. Such mentality of the Indian women keeps them in perpetual servitude of their husbands.

Thus, the words of Shankar's mother compelled Sumi to think whether the life of a woman is really nothing without a husband. She analyzes:

Is it 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 for everything, for the deprivation of a man's love, for the feel of his body against yours, his hands on your breast? (MT 167)

Deshpande's women characters have the realization and understanding of their sufferings, no doubt, but they lack the courage as well as stamina to reform the society and the prevailing evils in it. Sumi is not an exception. She knows that her troubles have multiplied due to irresponsible behaviour of her husband. She also knows what Gopal has done by deserting her and her children cannot be justified.

The question, which emerges in Sumi's mind related to relationship between a wife and a husband, is of the question of billion dollars. The novelist through Sumi raises such vital issue drawing the attention of readers. Such ideal relationship is not meant only for making love, satisfying sexual instinct and breeding children. It is a pious relation which succeeds on mutual cooperation, equal feeling from both sides and sincere dutifulness to each other. Sumi condemns the traditional practice of calling a prostitute for threading a bride's black beads thinking that it will prolong the life of the groom and protects the bride from widowhood. Sumi calls it "clever, convoluted thinking, twisted logic ... (MT 167-68).

If it is love, she calls it "a phantasmagoria that writers and poets haul trapped within words" (MT 191). To Sumi to be a saint and turn away from physical pleasure is not the genuine way of the life. She quotes Yayati's realization in that respect who realized:

A time comes when the pleasure of the body fall.  
They taste flat, insipid, perhaps even bitter. We want  
love to last, we think when we begin that it will, but  
it never does; it transforms into a desire for passion a  
struggle for power (MT 196)

The indulgence into family life and salvation from the life are two adverse things. The former binds one to the family affairs while the latter frees from the bondage of the birth and death forever. Gopal's desertion from the family is, perhaps, due to his willingness for liberation from the bondage of the life's endless circle.

Even the most popular and sacred Hindu's religious scriptures, The Shri Bhagavat Gita talks that a Karmayogin can obtain salvation by performing his bonded assignments honestly without indulging in the worldly lusts. A sudden jump towards renunciation makes someone sufferer. Who suffers? The wife and children are sufferers. After Gopal's sudden desertion or his escape from the life, it is forty year old Sumi and her immature children who suffer. Escaping from the life is not the essence of the life. The essence lies in the fulfillment of the assigned duty. The family is a chariot which must be pulled on by both wife and husband being equally responsible.

Sumi remembers the tense relationship between her father and mother-Shripati and Kalyani respectively. Kalyani-Shripati marriage is at the centre of this novel. Kalyani's plight is no way less poignant than that of Sumi's. Deshpande depicts Kalyani as an intelligent girl with a promising future, who had been allowed to pursue her studies. But the circumstances led her to be married to Shripati because Kalyani's mother Manorma had failed to beget a male heir to their property and feared that her husband would marry a second time. She was opposed to Kalyani marrying into a new family so that the property would then have gone to them. It is under such impervious circumstances that she gets Kalyani married to her brother Shripati just to keep the property within the family. Three children are born of this marriage - Sumi, Premi and Madhav.

Kalyani's real tragedy begins after the loss of Madhav for which she is held responsible. Though the son is mentally retarded, he has worth greater than Sumi and Premi because he is a son, the inheritor of the property. Shripati forced Kalyani to go back to her parents' home with their two daughters. He returns home only after Manorma, her mother-in-law, urges him on her death bed to bring Kalyani back. He obliges the request of Manorma, but not a word is exchanged between them. His return means no difference to her life or her existence as they live under the same roof as two separate individuals. Sumi reflects:

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. (MT 167)

How deep rooted is the desire for a son is to be witnessed in Kalyani-Manorma relationship. For Manorma Kalyani is a great disappointment as she gives birth to two baby girls. She wins the favour of her mother when she gives birth to a baby boy though he is a mentally retarded one. But that, too, proves short lived as she loses her only son in confusion at a railway station. The desire for the son has a religious base.

When Kalyani gives birth to a son, Shripati, her husband, rejoices it great. A big celebration is held. The house is full of guests, fragrant with flowers, gleaming with silverwork. The poor are fed and the dustbin in the street is overflowing with used banana leaf plates for two whole days. But when the son turns out to be an idiot, Kalyani is sent back home as a deserted wife with her two daughters.

Deshpande reflects that the mother-son bond is so deep rooted in man's psyche that it is nearly impossible to extricate oneself from it. It is evident from the inclination of Shankar to his mother who is very much rough to his wife. The logic which he advances in defence of not protecting his wife from his mother's rough behaviours is, "She gave me birth, she brought me up, she looked after me" (MT 216).

Supporting the view of Shankar, Gopal Says:

That is a debt we can never reply. It is a burden we  
can never lay down . . . 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? (MT 216)

Through Gopal, Deshpande talks about life and death. To Gopal life is nothing but a battle against death, a battle that we ultimately lose. Man is mortal. He is born to die. But what is immortality? Immortality means survival of life through children. Speaking about the truth Deshpande says:

Children are the means by which we can cheat  
death; they are our way of achieving immortality. As  
long as there are children, we will never be totally  
annihilated, the play will never end, and the curtain  
will never come down. (MT 46)

The view of the novelist regarding immortality is true. The survival of the mankind or even any type of creature in this world is through their off-springs. Wordsworth, the great English poet has also said "Child is the father of man." Birth and death is unceasing circle. Man dies but life yet survives in different forms. No one accurately knows what immortality is. The term itself is vague and the location of salvation is unknown. Yes, life is a battle, a struggle, but not against death, but against survival. One has to survive, one has to face difficulties, and one has to make life convenient. Escapism from life is not a solution.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, Shashi Deshpande's novel, A Matter of Time, articulates the agony, pain, doubts and fear of her characters - male and female alike. In this novel, her plot is related to three women representing three generations of the same family. All these three women are subjects to victimization by their husbands. All of them have to pass through mental agony and distress. Manorma is victimized by Vithalrao because she has

no son. Kalyani remains separated from her husband for a long time because she happens to lose her mentally retarded son in confusion at a railway station. Sumi is left out by Gopal for her whole life at the mid of her age and she goes under a great silence. Thus, it is obvious that all these three women have to face adversity of the life for which they are not responsible. The most surprising thing is that none of them has the courage to fight for their rights and status. They all tolerate injustice making no voice. The novel reflects the truth that the Indian women belonging to a male-dominated society based on the

traditional moorings, have no way out other than to endure insult, humiliation and negligence meted out to them by none but by their husbands. It proves that Deshpande's writings reflect the gross gender discrimination and women's victimization prevalent in the Indian society. Her realistic approach and reasonable views related to women's victimization and sufferings penetrate into India's social structure where women are found treated differently.

### Work Cited

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