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Transcending Gender Confines in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Abstract:

The issue of 'gender' and 'gender identity' has occupied significant place in literary theories and more specifically in feminist literary theory. The stereotypes of gender are maintained through the process of socialization. Masculinity is attributed to male and femininity to female. Men were thought to be intelligent, adventurous, dominating, rational, active creative; on the other hand, women were thought to be timid, docile, passive, emotional, conventional etc. But as these gender stereotypes are social and cultural construct thus they are subject to change with time and space. Thus the present paper is a sincere attempt to explore how the characters in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* go beyond their gender prescribed roles. In this novel Deshpande subverts stereotypical conventional ideals of motherhood, femininity, and masculinity. She shows both male and female sexes transcending their gender attributed traits.

Keywords: gender, gender identity, masculinity, femininity, stereotypes.

The issue of "gender" and "gender identity" has occupied significant place in literary theories and more specifically in feminist literary criticism. Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines gender as – "the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex." Feminist critics have attempted to distinguish between "sex" and "gender". For them sex is a biological phenomena while gender is socially constructed. There is no direct relation between gender and biological sex. "Masculinity and femininity are essentially coercive categories that straitjacket men and women" (Nayar 83). Gender discourse is always a practice of power, where masculinity is always associated with authority and superiority while femininity is associated with inferiority and lack. The stereotype of gendering is maintained through the process of socialization. Men and women were thought to inhabit bodies with different physical make-ups and to possess fundamentally different qualities and virtues. Men, as the stronger sex, were thought to be intelligent, courageous, and determined. Women, on the other hand, were more governed by their emotions, and their virtues were expected to be chastity, modesty, compassion, and piety. M. H. Abrams sums up these divergent traits thus, ". . . the masculine in our culture has come to be identified as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, creative; the feminine, by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional" (235). Men were thought to be more aggressive; women more passive. Men were the "bread winners" or primary wage earners, while women were expected to be primarily responsible for housework and childcare. Alfred Tennyson's poetry also confirms to these gender stereotypes as he writes:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:

Man for the sword and she for the hearth:

Man with the head and woman with the heart:

Man to command and woman to obey.

However, the 21st century has seen a shift in gender roles due to multiple factors such as new family structures, education, media, and several others. According to contemporary gender role ideology, gender roles have been and still are constantly changing. Londa Schiebinger in her book *Has Feminism Changed Science* also expresses similar views and enunciates that gendered characteristics – typically masculine or feminine behaviors, interests, or values – are not innate, nor are they arbitrary. They are formed by historical circumstances. They can also change with historical circumstances. Women’s writing and feminists have also questioned all such existing view points, that are essentially ‘patriarchal and conventional’ in nature. They reject the idea that a woman’s dignity and honor is inside the boundaries of home, as nurturer and care provider and man work out of the home as ‘bread earners’. For them this confinement of women to family and home has been central in restricting her status and identity to an incomplete human being, one who is necessarily defined with reference to man. Simone de Beauvoir, while scrutinizing the historical reasons behind ‘destiny’ and ‘situation’ of woman’s lives, rightly identifies ‘sexuality and socialization’ as the basic ‘poles of analyses’ around which her subjugation and subservience revolves. The right to property and ownership and its denial to women for ages can be another ‘decisive pole’ that has confined her existence and identity to a secondary human being.

The patriarchal hegemony does not allow woman to consider herself as an individual ‘subject’ who is free to make her own decisions and make her own choices. But still woman has managed to come out of her predefined gender thresholds whenever she got a chance and even out shown her male counterparts. A woman’s effort to understand herself and to affirm her identity irrespective of gender defined roles are being reflected with great vigor in the modern writings, especially by contemporary women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Bharti Mukherjee, Manju Kapur, Kavary Nambisan, Geeta Hariharan etc.

The present paper attempts to explore how the characters in Shashi Deshpande’s novel *A Matter of Time* go beyond their gender prescribed roles. This novel subtly shows the difference between the values ascribed to male and female traits in which man’s needs take precedence over women’s needs. Deshpande subverts stereotypical conventional ideals of motherhood, femininity, and masculinity. She shows both male and female sexes transcending their gender attributed traits. Female characters in this novel- Kalyani, Sumi, Aru exhibit masculine traits which are conventionally associated with males, on the other hand male characters- Shripati and Gopal, who escape their duty and responsibility towards their families, unveil feminine traits. Vinay Kirpal also is of the opinion that “Deshpande’s protagonists generally seek to come out of their traditional beliefs” (Geethamala, 196). For her writings, Deshpande herself tells Vanamala in an interview: “I want to reach a stage where I can write about human beings and not about men and women” (196).

A Matter of Time is set in the nineties of Karnataka. Gopal—a respected professor, Sumi’s husband walks out on his family for reasons even he cannot articulate. His wife, Sumi,

returns with their daughters Aru, Charu, and Seema to the shelter of the Big House where her parents, Kalyani and Shripati, live in oppressive silence: they have not spoken to each other in thirty-five years. As the mystery of this long silence is unraveled, a horrifying story of suffering and loss is laid bare, a story that seems to be repeated itself in Sumi's life.

In this novel Deshpande has created a brave new world for women challenging the earlier weak, docile, silent world. The women in this novel have different roles to play in society reconstructing themselves to the social conditions based on individual references. The novel centers around four generations of women- Manorama, Kalyani, Sumi (Sumitra) and Aru (Arundhati). Manorma, Kalyani's mother is dead by time the novel begins but is somehow always present through the narration of her daughter. Kalyani, her daughter- Sumi, and her granddaughter Aru are living in present generation.

Kalyani comes out to be a strong character. She is the victim of power game and she has endured the anguish of rejection. When Shripati ceases all communication with her, Kalyani does not react with hysterical show of emotions. Shripati locks himself up against all communication because of frustration, anger and despair, traits usually associated with females. Here, we are instantly reminded of *The Dark Room* by R.K.Narayan. The female protagonist Savitri locks herself up in a dark room—symbolic of her only way out to assert herself. 'The dark room' is taken as a stereotype usually attached with women for silent assertion, rejection of male-hegemony and articulation. But here it is Shripati, the male character, who locks himself up in the room. For him nursing his suffering self is far more important than caring for his wife and daughters. He forgets or rather does not wish to recognize that the grief of having lost a son is not his alone; it is Kalyani's as well. While Shripati limits himself to the four walls of his room, disowning his responsibilities as a male member of the family, Kalyani handled everything with stoic forbearance. For her daughters she plays the role of both father and mother. She builds her own cocoon, having Goda (her sister), Sumi and Premi (her daughters) and their families around the house. She never asks for Shripati's help in furnishing her family duties. By and large she maintains a stoic silence. Her silence is an emblem of "power" rather than "powerlessness", the "power" which is associated with male sex is now her forte. Kalyani in a way proved to the "man of the house". For her the narrator says:

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 act of cruelty. (Deshpande 151)

Gopal leaves his family in mid-current: his daughters are in their teens, college and school going girls; his wife is not employed and is not economically equipped to meet the day-to-day requirements and needs of his daughters; his in-laws are economically sound but have their own responsibilities. Exactly like his father-in-law he also walks out of conventional bound of duties and responsibilities as a male member of the family. In fact while Shripati has some reason for breaking ties with his wife, Gopal has no pronounced and valid reason for leaving his family. He is not able to explain to Kalyani, Ramesh, Premi or even his wife Sumi, the reason that compelled him so much as to isolate himself from his own family member. Gopal lack of inaction and sprightly spirit is evident when to Premi's probing, Gopal replies, "I can give you many answers, but I've begun thinking that the plain truth is that I just got tired" (Deshpande

133). Here, again in case of Sumi and Gopal gender roles are overturned. Cultures expect men to be assertive, ambitious and competitive, to strive for material success, and to respect whatever is big, strong, and fast. It expects women to serve and care for the non-material quality of life, for children and thought to be modest and tender. But contrary to cultural believes, Gopal's character emerges as 'passive, fragile and docile,' the traits usually related with females. After separation from Sumi he leads a life of almost passivity, regressing himself from the familial relations and limiting to a single room beside Shanker's press. He is very docile as he never tries to assert his authority while conversing with any of female characters and not even with his daughter Aru. He also rejects the material world for the metaphysical cravings.

It is Sumi who displays attributes culturally linked with male, i.e. attributes of masculinity—intelligence and ambition. Sumi, the protagonist displays an optimistic vision of life. She handles the crises of her life with indifference. She goes about her routine work as usual. She presents modern generation woman, conscious and rational. Her acceptance of Gopal's decision and her refusal to react to it, shows not a passive acceptance of man's supremacy but a contestation, a critique of tradition. Deshpande corroborates this point when in an interview she asserts,

Sumi's acceptance is not passive. She blacks 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 rather do anything for pride. She distances even her husband (Ramarao 256).

She works towards reclaiming her own identity rather than lamenting for desertion of her husband, Gopal. She decides not to coerce Gopal into coming back to her and here she exhibits her dignity. On the contrary she explores ways of coming to terms with the painful reality and going on with life. As Sumi picks up her heart and prepares for the future, she thinks, ". . . retracing my steps, picking up things—is this it? But she has turned resolutely away from even her immediate past, she is preparing herself for the future, for the job which she is soon to start on" (Deshpande 122).

Gopal's departure has brought out her real hidden strength. She becomes economically independent, immerses herself in gardening, learns to ride scooter and above all, discovers the writing talent within her and writes a play for her school children. "Revealing an independent and individualistic spirit. . . Sumi refuses to accept any kind of economic assistance either from her parents or from Premi, her doctor sister or from Ramesh, Gopal's doctor nephew" (Shree 115). She extends herself beyond the primary functions of the woman—housekeeping and child care. She supports her daughters both economically and financially without asking for Gopal's help in maintenance of their daughters. In the process of her resolution to grasp the situation, with stoicism, Sumi meets the disapproving comments from women like Shanker's mother,

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

Sumi feels surprise the way, even today, a woman in the society is known and gets respect only through her husband. The fate of woman is measured only through her marital status. But by recalling herself of the truth of her parent's relationship, Sumi dismisses the old woman's thinking, "What is a woman without a husband?" (Desjhpande 167) and "to have a husband living is everything" (168). And "it is through her own actions that she decolonizes the patriarchy, and stands on her own by appropriating her marginality" (Joshi 111).

If Sumi is trying to retain self identity Aru, who speaks of "sins of patriarchy" (Deshpande 168), fights for the right of women, and especially for her own mother. In Aru's resistance there is the younger generation's impatience and restlessness to obtain justice. She is full of the sense of injustice and protest against her father. She is filled with anger and resentment against her father and wants her father, "to realize he can't get away scot-free" (137), and takes bold step of exploring possibilities of bringing legal action against her father. Her behavior, her analyzing of problem, her readiness for action, her capacity to take decision and stick to it - all are qualities that shows her going beyond traditional stereotypes of gender. She is not prototype of conventional female - timid, docile, and fragile, rather she is rebellious in nature. She even threatens her father to drag him to court. Aru undercuts the identification of female in norms in her efforts to carry out male duties, as is clear from these lines:

She has taken on a great many of the chores at home. It makes a sense, in a way, that she leaves Charu free for her studies in this crucial second year of her college. But there is more to it. She wants to be the man of the family, Sumi thinks, when Aru insists on accompanying her mother to the dentist. She wants to take Gopal's place, she wants to fill th blank Gopal has left in our lives. (36)

Traditionally, property ownership is given to male members of family and it passes on from one male heir to another in the extended family chain. Women are always regarded bereft of property ownership. *A Matter of Time* is divided into three parts—The House, The Family, and The River. The novel starts and ends with a description of 'The House' which is named as "Vishvas". Here, "Vishvas" does not stand for some ideology rather for the name of ancestor of Kalyani's father Vithalrao. The author writes that the house was, "built by a man not just for himself, but for his sons and his son's sons" (Deshpande 3). There is the yearning for a son and tradition of transference of family property only to male descendants and never to female descendants. This is the reason why Manorama was not happy with the birth of Kalyani and in her effort to keep the family property within family she forced her brother - Shripati to marry her daughter - Kalyani. But as if the family is under some curse, Kalyani's only son was lost on BT station, and the family is again left with female successors. Towards the end Shripati's will, referring to Kalyani as Vithalrao and Manorama's daughter and not as his wife, instigate her with a sense of empowerment. It is her identity, her individuality that she finds ultimately, with this subversion of conventional transference of family property. She does not feel the sting of having been robbed of her marital status. "On the contrary, it is as if the words have given her something more than the house, restored something she had lost; they seem, in fact, to have strengthened her" (245).

Aru further undermines the male/female binaries by and accepting the responsibility of the house noticing the paralytic condition of Kalyani after the death of Sumi and Shripati in

accident. Consoling her grandmother she says, “Amma, I’m here, I’m your daughter, Amma, I’m your son, I’m here with you, Amma, I’m here . . . ” (Deshpande 233). And with her decision to stay and support her grandmother, Aru proved her grandmothers earlier assertion, “Daughters don’t belong. All three of you birds will fly away to your own nests” (198), wrong and validates her declaration, “I’m not going anywhere, Amma” (198). She demonstrates that ‘daughters also belong’ and when situation demands they can cut across the confines of their gender role. They are also capable of handling all sort of work done by man. They can live on their own, without any help or support from their menfolk.

In this way in *A Matter of Time*, Shashi Deshpande foregrounds the concept of ‘Ardhnarishver’—God is neither male nor female. Divine is half male and half female. Everyone is like that. There are genes of both father and mother within each one of us. Masculinity and Femininity are determined by dominant genes and not by biological sex. Sometimes circumstances also makes repressive genes to come into play and it is the case when female can also exhibit features normally attributed to male and vice-versa, Similar is the case in *A Matter of Time* as in it Kalyani, Sumi, Aru extend their limits to fields usually occupied and related to masculinity, whereas Shripati and Gopal exhibit feminine traits.

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