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Emergence of a New Woman: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande is a well renowned women writer in English. Her novels are remarkable for portraying the stark reality of women's oppression in Indian patriarchal society. *A Matter of Time* is one of Shashi Deshpande's latest novels, published in 1996. The novel veers around a woman who is more mature and confident than her earlier counterparts. While the protagonists of Deshpande's earlier novels cannot think of themselves as an independent being; they always bank upon the institution of marriage. But, here, in this novel, the women depicted are more self-reliable and self-dependent. They are eager to assert their own selfhood. They are not ready to subdue themselves under the stifling pressures of patriarchy. These women are on a new road to carve a niche of their own. In this novel, Deshpande uses silence as a strategic tool to resist patriarchy. The characters in the novel don't waste their energy in questioning or blaming others; rather they use their will power for attaining their self identity.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Self-Reliable, Self-dependent, Identity.

Shashi Deshpande, writer of ten novels, six collections of short stories, four books for children and a screen play, is considered as one of the most accomplished contemporary women writers in English. Recipient of Sahitya Akademi award in 1990 for her novel, *That Long Silence*; Deshpande's works have been translated into many European Languages. Shashi Deshpande is an eminent novelist with a deep insight into the psyche of middle class English women. In her novels, she presents a volatile portrayal of Indian womanhood with a remarkable insight into a woman's psyche. As P. Ramamoorthi says, "Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life and the protagonist's place in it."¹(1999:38) Shashi Deshpande gives voice to many voiceless women who tolerate their oppression silently. Her novels trace the need of her women protagonists to tell, relate and end the silences heaped on them through centuries of repression and social conditioning. As is expressed by Indira j. Parikh and Pulin K. Garg: 'A woman rarely talks of herself. In normal circumstances, she talks only of her role, her family and the traditions of the society. She may talk of her reactions once in a while, but she keeps her real feelings hidden'"². (Indira J. Parikh and Pulin K Garg, 1989: 34.)

In Deshpande's own words: My novels are about women trying to understand themselves, their history, their roles and their place in this society, and above all their relationship with others... In all my novels... I have rejected stereotypes and re-questioned the myths which have so shaped the image of women, even the self image of women in this country. In a

way, through my writing, I have tried to break the long silence of women in our country.³ (Shashi Deshpande Biography, Jrank. Org.)

In Shashi Deshpande's novels the woman protagonists take a voyage from silence to articulation through the stages of oppression, conformity, resistance and transformation. The present paper is a study of her novel *A Matter of Time* (1996), which adds a new dimension to the craftsmanship of Deshpande. Like her other novels, the present novel is also woman centric, revolves around the general feminist issues like incompatibility between partners, suppression and exploitation of women by patriarchal society. Though many critics have blamed Shashi Deshpande for her repeated themes that revolve around Indian women's travails in male dominated society. R. S. Pathak says, "Deshpande's novels have, like those of Jane Austen, a narrow range", and there "is the recurrence of certain themes in them"⁴. (1998:21) Similarly, Ruby Milhoutra finds out that Deshpande has presented in her novels "modern Indian woman's search for these definitions about the self and society, and the relationships that are central to women".⁵ (2005:83) But a close study of Deshpande's novels brings out that all these allegations of being tautologous and narrow in its range, cannot be validated because they indicate a sure and consistent progress in the form of writer's art, her perception of life and the belief in their inner strength and the achievement of individuality. Her novels portray a continuous journey of her characters from a meek, passive and silent creature to an eloquent and fully autonomous being.

A Matter of Time tells about Sumi's (Sumitra's) life after her husband Gopal leaves her and their three well grown up daughters Aru (Arundhati), Charu and Seema. The story is told through the four generations of women of the household-Manorama, Kalyani, Sumitra (Sumi) and Aru. The story unfolds through not the words of the character but their silence and inner thought process that sometimes makes them inaccessible to their own family. Shashi Deshpande applies the stream of consciousness technique with certain precision in this rich work of art. As per Anuradha Roy:

The Silence that predominates the world of Deshpande's women is not that of peace and tranquillity rather it is an amalgam of their pain, anger, frustration, defensiveness and rejection. Silence takes various shapes in her work. There is the unthinking silence; the resigned silence and finally the one bristling with suppressed anger.⁶ (1999: 88)

A Matter of Time is distinct from her earlier novels in the sense that the protagonists Sumi, Kalyani, Aru are related to each other as mothers and daughters but unlike the mothers of earlier novels, they are not inimical towards each other, but, rather provide them all the care, love and guardianship that they want in that crucial hour of life. As Usha Bande said about the novel:

There are three generations of women with their impregnable silence and suffocating life; but it is the impatient new generation ready to fight it out tooth and nail that provides a whiff of cool breeze. How successful will this new generation be in getting justice is in fact, a matter of time.⁷ (1998:134)

A Matter of Time is a probing of a woman's inner life. Deshpande looks into woman's fast changing prospects and depict their family as a mode of strength. Sumi gets complete emotional support from her parents and relatives; and this imparts her distinctiveness from her earlier counterparts; who live as a strange person within their own family. Her young heroines be it Saru, Manjari, Devyani or Sumi always go beyond the traditional way of life and patriarchal notions. As Deshpande says, "As writing is born out of personal experience, the fact that I am a woman is bound to surface, Besides, only a woman could write my books – they are written from inside, as it were".⁸ (1)

The novel veers around the character Gopal, who walks out on his wife Sumi and three daughters. Sumi reacts very casually to it. She has a very decorous and august personality and that is why she fathoms out that life must go on. Gopal's renouncement traumatized her as a wife but for the sake of her daughters she decides to metamorphose into a strong personality. Like her earlier counterparts, like Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*; she does not opt to run away rather she decides to confront life as it come in her way. At the age of forty, she stands alone and deserted but fully resolute to make her family life better. And this firm resolution of standing on her own feet makes her different from her earlier counterparts. A Woman in such circumstances seems to be totally splintered, but Sumi becomes emotionally strong. In the words of H. Ranjita:

Sumi is one who does not compromise as an individual. She neither interferes with others' decision and individual space, not even with her husband's decision to leave her and family life for good, nor does she let others interfere with her in any way. She bears all the sufferings and uncertainties of life stoically and still maintains her individual self and independence.⁹ (2011:145)

When Gopal deserts Sumi and leaves his family life throwing the responsibility of their daughters on Sumi alone, everyone expects her to break down and mourn the loss. But she presents herself as a combatant. Although, she endures everything silently, but this silence cannot be termed as a passive one. This silence becomes a tool of resistance to existing social norms. To many Sumi's silence may seem unnatural, like she is not concerned with the fact that her husband has left her forever. But on the contrary, Sumi is completely aware of the situation and its consequences. There are two plausible reasons for this silence of hers. First, she knows she has to stay or at least pretend to be 'normal' for the sake of her daughters who feel betrayed by their father. And second, she knew at the back of her mind that someday this might happen. After about a year of separation Sumi goes to talk to Gopal and she reminds him of a conversation that had happened the night they had decided to get married and Gopal had said: "...that at any time if either of us wanted to be free, the other would let go. We are not going to be tied together, you said. No handcuffs, you said. And I agreed."¹⁰ (221)

Nonetheless, Sumi does cope up with the situation in the best way she could. She even goes house-hunting to find a place comfortable and safe enough for her and her daughters. She learns to ride the scooter and also take up a temporary job filling in for a teacher in a school. Although she has a self respect of her own, but after her father's

insistence she comes to live with her parents Kalyani and Shripati, who are living in a strange oppressive silence for thirty five years. She placates her mother and makes her understand that as long as they all are in the Big House she should get used to everybody lending a helping hand in the household chores. The other silence that pervades the Big House, Sumi's parental house, is that between her mother and Aru's grandmother Kalyani and her husband, Sumi's father Shripati. The reason of this silence was the loss of their mentally retarded son. The importance of a male child has aptly been demonstrated and stated through the ages. A son is necessary to carry forward the family name and legacy. It is a son who is the responsibility bearer of the family, the provider, the protector and the rightful heir to the family. Without a son the family has no continuance and it ceases to exist. The references to scripture Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad(1.5.17) in the middle part of the novel reverberates this longing for a son, another male companion in a family of females by both Gopal and Shripati:

Whatever wrong has been done by him,
his son frees him from it all;
therefore he is called a son. By his
son a father stands firm in this world.(91)

Apart from these beliefs it is also believed that a woman becomes complete, is the true 'life-giver' when she bears a son, and thus she commands respect from everyone around her. Although, this myth has certainly been broken by the biologically proven evidence that it is the man who is responsible for the sex of the child and not the woman yet, a major part of the middle class society would like to believe otherwise. And it is the loss of a son only that created a void between Kalyani and her husband Shripati which was filled only with dread, hopelessness, anger, hatred and silence. A silence that was loud enough to engulf every other conversation within its folds. Shripati searched for the lost boy throughout the station, city, "like a mad man" for the whole day. Kalyani returned home, a destitute wife, Shripati returned home after two months, but, since then, "for the last thirty five years, never spoke to Kalyani".(139)

Kalyani, alone, knows this pain of absconding and experiences the agony of rejection. Sunita Goyal says, "Kalyani's attitude shows her enlightened state of mind where she can think of resisting patriarchal oppression instead of suffering silently, passively and endlessly by taking solace in other women's company".¹¹ (2013:163) She maintains a stoic silence that becomes a powerful tool of resistance. As Deshpande told in an interview:

When silence becomes deliberate it acts as a barrier to the penetration of the soul by a perceiver, it works as an operation of power rather than powerlessness. As it withholds communication it produces a awe and becomes a potent tool of resistance.¹² (Rao, 1998:257)

Her resistance is so powerful that for Aru, she appears not as a helpless victim, but as a strong woman who has come out intact from all kinds of victimization. Silence, when it represses communication, it becomes a powerful tool of resisting patriarchal norms. Deshpande sees the need to coordinate the man-woman relationship as equal partners. There is no victory in the subjugation and destruction of the male. The need is to see each other's need for space, freedom of expression and love.¹³ (Kaur, 2009:56) Again Beena Agarwal says, "The fictional world of Shashi Deshpande is not directed towards the annihilation of the existing order but it seeks a reorientation of society where a more balanced relationship might have been possible."¹⁴ (2009:101) Sumi's return to the "Big House" of her parents, who have not spoken to each other in the last thirty five years, reveals the continuity of the chain of agony and threatening silence that proceeds in the life of majority of women in some way or the other.

In this multigenerational mesh of human relationships, the painful silence of the older generation of women, due to social and psychological affliction, amalgamated with the cycles of loss, love, strength and renewal of the younger ones as they are faced with difficult choice of asserting their autonomy. Their quest for identity seems to be stifled amid the pressures of tradition and modernity. The fact that Sumi lets Gopal desert her without even a single word of protest or questioning does not stand for her weakness rather it shows her maturity. As per Binod Kumar Roy:

Sumi reveals essentially an optimistic vision of life. She demonstrates strength and maturity even in adversity. She never wants to end her life like that of her mothers. She introspects her relation with Gopal in a more matured way and recognizes that Gopal's life and its concept was always different from hers.¹⁵ (2015:118)

She desires to ask him just one question : "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"? (27) The question remains unasked and hence, unanswered but the ease and composure with which Sumi copes up with the whole situation make her distinct from her earlier counterparts. In the words of Siddhartha Sharma:

She has come to terms with her present with a new-born understanding to move ahead in life without any bitterness for the man who had been the cause of her humiliation and suffering. Now she is a new woman with a new understanding and consciousness...¹⁶ (2005:15)

Sumi manages her role as a single parent very beautifully; reconciles her status as a destitute wife with calmness and takes shelter inside a 'deathlike silence'. Her very silence conveys her agony more effectively than words could. The English proverb *Speech is Silver, Silence is Golden* aptly describes Sumi's character. Her silence doesn't show any thoughtlessness on her part, rather it becomes the root cause of all her strategies and determination to recognize her inner strength and eventually, she succeeds in achieving her individuality. Her independent nature can also be seen in her refusal to take monetary help from her parents, friends and relatives by taking a teaching job. The past always frightened

her through memories. But Sumi has resolutely turned away from her past, preparing herself for a hopeful future. At the age of forty, she took a daring decision to start teaching without fearing the loneliness and disintegration resulting from a broken marriage. As a mother she is the other name of responsibility, love, care and concern. She is an indispensable person; who is always anxious about her daughter's well being and happiness. Her keenness towards her daughter can be clearly surmised when Aru and she met with an accident; she becomes totally distraught and cries for help despite the severe bleeding from her own injuries. She always yearns for a joyous and comfortable life for her daughters. As she says: "I want her to enjoy the good things in life, I want her to taste life, I want her to relish it and not spit it out because she finds it better". (220)

Sumi's daughter Aru is the archetype of the new generation in the novel, who does not meekly accept the wrongs done to her mother and her family. She rather, believes "that you speak out, state the truth that you stand up and defend yourself, that you refuse to be misjudged". (143) Aru becomes a symbol of indomitable spirit and the above quoted statement shows her strength of will and stern resolution of the new generation. She is antagonist to her mother who always remains silent. She always insisted her mother to make a police complaint against her father. As Sumi says, "Do you want to punish him, Aru? I don't. I'm not interested. I just want to get on with life. Let him go Aru, just let him go. This is not good for you". (61) Aru does not want her father to go scot-free while they had to face the ignominy, shame and humiliation by the society. The male dominated society that we are brought up in condemns such women who are left by their husbands. She suddenly becomes an outcast with the man gone as if she has no life of her own. She is treated as a 'poor soul' as if with the man her right to live is also gone. In this context Y.S.Sunita Reddy says:

Episodes from history and mythology bear witness to men who were venerated for their selflessness while no thought was given to the silent suffering and martyrdom of their wives. Lakshmana's steadfastness and devotion find no parallel in Indian mythology, while Siddhartha is hailed for spurning the luxury and comfort of princely life in pursuit of knowledge. Their respective spouses Urmila and Yashodhara, however, remain shadowy figures in the background, doomed to live a life of anonymity and insignificance.¹⁷ (2001:116)

But Aru rebels against all such rules of society and chooses to live her life the way she wants to, on her own terms. She decides to sue him for family maintenance. In this way, Aru becomes the spokesperson of all these 'silent suffering women', who speak for their rights. She inherits her mother's quality of courtliness, megalomania, prowess and self-reliance. She has a self-respect that can be inferred from her conversation with surekha: 'You say your mother has a job. Your father has given her all that they had. You have a home to live in. There are people prepared to help you with your education.' Aru replies 'But all these other people helping us-that's charity. I don't want charity. It's not fair.' (204) She assures her father – "we'll be quite alright, don't worry about us". (246) She becomes the articulated vehicle of feminist voices in the novel, who interrogates the

injustices heaped upon women for so many centuries. She joins a computer class and becomes a part of woman's social activist group. When she heard the news of Sumi's and Shripai's death, she holds Kalyani and says, "Amma, I'm here, I'm your daughter Amma, I'm your son, and I'm here with you". (233)

Though deeply pained at her mother's untimely death, she ensures her father not to worry about them. As Gopal retreats without any words of farewell, he looks back and is amazed to see the two women (Aru – his daughter and Kalyani – his mother-in-law) standing side by side, "... two women, the two faces, one old and the other so young, linked by a curious resemblance". The thought that hovers over Gopal's mind while observing the 'smile of encouragement' on the faces of two women, reflects the growth and evolution that has taken place in the thought processes and actions of the woman protagonist when it comes to bearing up with the pains of silence : "If it is indeed true that we are bound to our destinies, that there is no point struggling against them, even then this remains that we do not submit passively or cravenly, but with dignity and strength. Surely, this, to some extent frees us from our bonds?" (246)

At the end of the novel and her journey of life, Sumi is shown to reach a stage of self-sufficiency ushering a new hope for every woman in the society. In Deshpande's own words:

The coming together of Aru and Kalyani the older and the younger generation, is the 'biggest hope' : "For the old mother, the hurt which was caused by Sumi's death is healed by Aru and this is how life is always. Life has always to be made possible with the future generations... this is how it is to me"¹⁸ (quoted in S.Prasanaa Sree).

The journey of Sumi from her 'death like silence' to 'blocking out' all unpleasantness and "getting on with life" is a remarkable accomplishment. As Vimala Rama Rao says, "She does not want pity; she would do anything for pride". Instead of wasting her energy on meditating why her husband left her, she focuses on enhancing her creative output and becomes successful in her endeavour when she writes a play "The Gardener's Son", for the school function. Encouraged by her play's success, she decides to rewrite the story of Surpanakha in *The Ramayana*, from a distinct point of view: "Female sexuality, We're ashamed of owning it, we can't 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 – it is this Surpanakha I'm going to write about" (191)

This decision of re-writing Surpanakha's story from a woman's point of view is indicative of Sumi's modernistic attitude. The overall picture represented by the novel ensures us a fresh pioneering of life: "Nothing is over, things keep coming back over and over again, they are all connected" (219)

The novel depicts all the shabbiness, miseries and unscrupulousness of life that is full of agonies, inhibitions, disappointments and humiliation. But the most important thing that strikes a reader is the determination to move on in life with grace and dignity and without thinking about adverse circumstances. As Elenore Geethamala opines about the novel :

Deshpande has created a brave new world for women challenging the earlier weak, docile, silent world. The women now have different roles to play in society reconstructing themselves to the social conditions based on individual references. Woman can no longer be subjugated or governed by the rigid norms of philosophy, theology and social conduct.¹⁹ (2009: 143)

The novel appears to be a “saga of silent suffering human” of three generations on face of it but an in depth study of the novel shows that it is only through self- examination and self-searching, through courage and indomitable will that one can change one’s own circumstances from utter despair to hope. Regarding the novel, Prof. K. M. Thakkar says:

Shashi Deshpande tries to bring out the idea of a woman explicating herself and emerging out of the cocoon of self-pity to spread her wings of self-confidence. After Gopal’s desertion Sumi tried to reclaim herself by indulging in gardening, learning the scooter, becoming economically independent and by writing plays.²⁰ (2014:154)

So, Sumi also finds her real identity after her separation from Gopal. When she was with him he did everything himself; Sumi totally shielded, protected and cocooned from the travails of real life. But after his sudden desertion, her life came crashing down. She was flung into the deep end; all alone but for a remarkably devoted family who resolutely stood by her. She emerges out as a new woman who can live her life on her own terms and conditions. Her decision of taking to teaching at the age of forty shows Sumi’s resilient spirit to create an identity of her own and she becomes successful in realizing her autonomy and asserting her selfhood.

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