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Gender Discrimination and Feminist Concern in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

V. Rajeswari

Assistant Professor of English
C.M.S. College of Science and Commerce
Chinnavedampatti
Coimbatore – 641049.

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Abstract:

The Indian women has for years been a silent sufferers, which means distress, pain, frustration, disappointment. This struggle started from their childhood itself, which is still going on. Women, they started moving many fields education, work, politics, society etc. even though they settled and getting name and fame in their career still they struggling between the tradition of the family and searching for their personal liberty. Indian writing in English, which has grown over the years in bulk, variety and maturity has aroused considerable interest both in India and abroad. Many women writers in India, portrayed the struggle of women in the male dominated society.

Shashi Deshpnde is one of the most prominent woman novelist who stand apart from other feminist writers in portrayal of strong, progressive, self-sufficient women characters. She maintained that she writes about person to person and person to society relationships that she should not be evaluated by her gender and that her authorial position stays beyond male female dichotomy. In the novel, *A matter of Time* she explores the complex relationships within an extended family encompassing three generations of men and women.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, status of woman, individual liberty, human relationship.

“Feminism isn’t about making women stronger.

Women are already strong. It’s about changing the way the

World perceives that strength”

-G. D. Anderson.

The status of woman all over the world particularly in India has been undergoing a rapid change in recent times. The personality of the typical Indian woman was over whelming swamped by the male dominated attitude against the backdrop of an exclusively male oriented culture. The emergence of Indian woman writers writing in English is of great importance. It brings a new age of brightness for Indian woman. Traditionally the work of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior

worth of male experience. A number of Indian women novelists made their debut in the 1990s, producing novels which revealed the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women. Shashi Deshpande is one of the most prominent woman novelist who stand apart from other feminist writers in portrayal of strong, progressive, self-sufficient women characters. Shashi Deshpande was born in the year of 1938 in Karnataka. Her father Sriranga was an eminent Kannada dramatist and writer. She received her early education at protestant mission school in Karnataka. Since childhood she was fond of English literature and used to read various types of English books. She has written four children's books, a number of short stories, and ten novels. She deals with the inner world of the Indian woman in her novels. She portrays her heroine in a realistic manner.

Her writing career thus reflects an ongoing process of problematizing life's conflicts and compromises, resolutions and irresolution, ironies and affirmations, triumphs and tragedies, and so on. This constantly mellowing mode of viewing human condition without any closures concretises major themes of her fictions such as man-woman relationship, human desire, longing, body, gender discrimination, marginalisation, rebellion, protest and above all, a harrowing experience. She maintained that she writes about person to person and person to society relationship, that she should not be evaluated by her gender, and that her authorial position stays beyond male/female dichotomy. Lately, however, Deshpande has slightly revised her position in the essay 'Why I am a Feminist?' without abandoning her rejection of stereotypical differentiation and slotting of males and females. She says,

'It took me years to say even to myself, 'I am a feminist'.

It was the culmination of a voyage that began within myself and went on to be ocean of women's place in the world. Today, when I call myself a feminist, I believe that the female of the species has the same right to be born and survive, to fulfil herself and shape her life according to her needs and the potential that lies within her, as the male has. I believe that women are neither inferior nor subordinate human beings, I believe that nature, when conferring its gifts on humans, did not differentiate between males and females, except for the single purpose of procreation'.

Deshpande's novels are woman-centred, her intention obviously is to present women as they are and not to create larger than of life characters. Through her novels she has tried to unravel the dynamics of marital relations in the rapidly changing present world and sincerely explores the desperate struggle of her protagonists to define and obtain a selfhood, thus putting it in a sustained and sharpened focus to indicate the changing dynamics of man-woman relation. The majority of her novels depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated house wife, this subject matter often being considered superficial compared lines of women depiction of the repressed and oppressed lives of women.

Dilemma of the Indian women

Indian tradition has generally respected womanhood, though occasionally we find derogatory references to women. Even God is regarded as half man, half woman, ardhnanarishwara. Manu declares that where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased, where they are not honoured, all works become fruitless. In ancient times the only image of a

women was “Girhlaxmi, her only function was to produce children and then grandchildren nothing else. For her, there was no life outside the home. The sole aim of her life was to follow her father in childhood, husband in youth, and son in the old age. In a patriarch society the husband is considered to be God however cruel or indifferent he may be. The status of a woman in either goddess or slave but not as human being. She cannot think of her own individual identity. Even her name keeps changing according to the desire of her husband.

The institution of marriage was exalted in the Indian tradition. Women were free to choose their husbands. Women were not the bond slaves of pleasure. The end of marriage is spiritual comradeship. The Mahabharata says,

‘Let this heart of yours be mine, and let this heart of mine be yours.’

Motherhood is another category which has been critiqued and reviewed in a variety of ways. It is one of the cultural impositions which deny women personhood. And though life is born out of the sexual act, motherhood itself erases both sexuality and selfhood. It is asexual. Women, young and old, can be addressed as ‘Maa’ a term respect. The large majority of women, as men, however, prefer marriage and motherhood to the life of saintliness, science or scholarship. They are the great conservators of our culture. Even in families where they have received the modern education, they adhere to the household ritual, cradle song and popular poetry. A definite philosophy of life is bound up with these. By the very quality of their being, women are the missionaries of civilization. Besides, not all women of all castes enjoyed the rare privilege. Even, in the oppressive patriarchal social structures, the women had to negotiate survival through various patriarchal attributes like dowry, kinship, caste, community, sati etc. their position as submissive was justified by their male counterparts whose philosophy was that the individual was considered to be part of the larger social collective, dependent for its survival upon cooperation and self-denial for the greater good. This is evident in one of the laws of Manu, which says,

‘In childhood a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under Her husband’s and when her husband is dead, under her sons, she should not Have independence.’

In the novel *A matter of Time* explores the complex relationships within an extended family, encompassing three generations of men and women. At the heart of the novel is eighteen years old Aru, struggling to understand her father’s desertion and her mother’s indifference and in the course of a few turbulent months, forging entirely unexpected relationships that are destined to change the course of her life.

Deshpande places the failed marriage of Sumi and Gopal firmly at the centre of the novel and it is juxtaposed with other marriages. The protagonist Sumi, she can’t say anything specific between the relationships with her husband.

“Disjointed? Uncoordinated?”

there is nothing more to say. Gopal is also tried to tell her something but he didn’t. This creates a gap between them. Once she had separated from Gopal in a crowd. He frantically

searching for her and had found her at exactly the same spot where she had realized and lost her hope.

“he was no longer with her”

After her husband's desertion, she cannot connect herself in the surroundings. She says,

“Gopal's desertion is not just a tragedy, it is both a shame and disgrace”

In Indian tradition, girls grow up with a notion of their temporary membership in the natal home. Sumi is the one who has the air of being lost,

“of having no place in her childhood home”

She shows no outward sign of distress. She does not escape from the responsibilities of relationships. She relates without interrupting the freedom of her life partner and his decision. Sumi recognizes her father's substitute, which helped her to get out of a marriage, which her father never wanted. Sumi feels Kalyani is more of a victim than Shripati. She ponders over the words of Shankar's mother she says,

‘What is a woman without her husband?’

She feels an inner urge of protest against this social attitude towards female, which crumbles the individuality, and freedom of females. She feels very strong injustice in male's behaviour with females. She thinks,

‘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 wifehood make up for

Everything?’

The protagonist Sumi is aware of the partiality and saw it then the adoration of the male child. It must have been this way in the stable in Bethlehem,

“in Nanda's house on the bank of Yamuna in Gokul. The male child belongs”

These words of Sumi clearly indicate that this adoration of a male child is something universal in nature. It is deeply ingrained in Indian mind and so cannot be easily wiped out. Moreover,

the male child enjoys the sense of belongingness which a female child is not entitled to feel. Right from the start of her life she is constantly kept aware of the societal demand that one day or the other she has to bid adieu to her parental home. This expectation of the society is a clear cut menace to herself. It is an irony, the girl child does not and cannot belong to the place where she first opens her eyes, where she gets the first feel and lesson of love and life. All these dialectics of society and self-hinder the full growth and development of a woman that she may otherwise come to realise and consequently feel a unique bliss which one tastes after the realisation of a long cherished dream.

Mother daughter relationship

Mother daughter relationship has also occupied an important place in Deshpande's novels. She is accurately aware that the prevalent patriarchal ideology is more often than not too strongly ingrained in women for them to treat their daughter as human beings in their own right. When Kalyani comes to know about Gopal's desertion, she cries like an animal in pain,

"No, my God, not again"

Thus, Sumi is free from the typical Indian female trait in man woman relation and also the usual aftermath of distracted relation. She wants to get equality, which is free from any kind of gender difference, and she feels it when Shripati sit on pillion and she rides the scooter.

Gopal's desertion is of a different order but still, Shripati, her husband has cut himself off completely from her and has not spoken to her for more than thirty years and she fears that the nightmare is being revisited on her daughter, Sumi. Whereas Sumi thinks about her three daughters they have change themselves. She says,

*"I don't want my daughters to live with a hand clasped over their mouths,
like Premi and I"*

here Shashi Deshpande showing her view between two generation mothers. Sumi knows what happened to her mother and she is thinking that will not be happened again. She is frightened.

"I know my life is not like my mother's. Our life was complete"

Kalyani maintained a silence with her husband nearly fifteen years, as a daughter Sumi didn't give any solution for their silence. But after desertion of Gopal, Aru suggests her mother to meet a lawyer. Sumi objects her opinion.

"What? Get a divorce? I'm not interested"

Aru questioned her father,

"Why did you get married at all, why did you have children?"

These words are reflecting responsibility of man in our society. It is their duty to save the wife

and children throughout their life.

Gopal's insecure childhood:

Gopal's character takes a cold and rational view of the family bound by ritualized ties. He wants to escape from social commitment and familial bonds. He doubts the permanence of human relationships. Gopal realizes the emptiness that lurks behind human relationships. He understands that,

*'We bury our fears deep, we stamp hard on the earth, we build our
Lives on this solid, hard foundation but suddenly the fears come to
Life and the earth shakes with their struggle to surface.'*

Gopal's childhood has not been normal. He realised the fact that his father had taken his brother's widow for marriage. He struggles within himself and undergoes severe inner conflict. Gopal for long has been nurturing the same feeling of loneliness and desolation.

"Emptiness, I realized then, is always waiting for us. The nightmare we most dread"

Gopal's desertion disturbed the whole family, more so his wife, Sumi. Right from her marriage, Sumi has been a content wife and mother and has willingly subordinated herself to her husband and daughters. After marriage, Gopal saying, I knew I needed her, her warmth, her humanness, her womanness.

"they were together in that magic circle, woman and child. And I was outside"

Here, Gopal is justifying his desertion. Every woman have their prime responsibility to take care their children after given the child birth. Woman got pregnant, there is an overriding reason for living, a justification for life that is loudly and empathetically true. Gopal said this to Aru,

*"Marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes,
a life time of commitment, is no possible for all of us"*

Gopal is disenchanted with the material world and he enunciates the house holder state. He breaks himself free from the bondage of marriage and family. The entire novel revolves around the questions why Gopal walked out of his marriage and how the rest, his wife and daughters cope with his decision. Characters of the novel realized that they had to unshackle themselves from centuries of bondages to social norms and pre-oriented roles, yet they succeeded in doing it only within the limited purview of their own lives.

Conclusion:

Shashi Deshpande is thus one of the most important Indian novelists writing in English. Gifted with a rare literary bent of mind, she has matured with experiences in life and readings. For her fictional concerns and art, she has made a niche for herself among Indian English novelists. The transparency of her language and her spontaneity make her novels highly readable. Her real contribution lies in the portrayal of plights and problems, trials and tribulations of the middle-class Indian women specially those who are educated and have chosen a career for themselves. Deshpande knows this segment of the Indian society very well. Once she remarked,

'I realised that I write what I write because I have to, because it is within me. It's one point of view, a world from within the women, and that I think is my contribution to Indian writing.' Deshpande is not unconcerned about Indian reality in respect of the lot of women, but she is not a strident and militant kind of feminist who sees the male as the sole

cause of woman's problems. The novel *A Matter of Time* is a successful effort in which Deshpande portrays the mental state of different kinds of people on the journey of freedom. The novel is narrated mainly from Gopal and Sumi's point of view and all other characters are in relation with these two main characters. As an Indian English novelist Shashi Deshpande stands apart, for she writes about certain specific concerns in her own manner. She dives deep into the human heart and recreates characters in their situations. She maintained that she writes about person to person and person to society relationships, that she should not be evaluated by her gender, and that her authorial position stays beyond male /female dichotomy. Shashi Deshpande concludes this novel with the hope of the protagonist Sumi has the generosity to gracefully free her husband from marital bonds without venting ill- feelings. She is confident of her capabilities to make choices and assumes control over her life. She proves that women like her are capable of ushering in a positive change in the social structure.

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