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## Determinism and Free Will in *A Matter of Time*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper maps the ways in which Deshpande uses Determinism and Free will to bring out characterisations of her novel. Deshpande's novels are invariably categorized as feminist novels, though she herself vehemently deplores the tag. This reading attempts to focus the lens on the important theme of Determinism versus Free will, used extensively by Deshpande in most of her novels, though more prominently in *A Matter of Time*. Leaving the visible domain of feminism, if one analyses the depth of her characters' psyche, a strong current of conflict between the forces of determinism and free will becomes pronouncedly palpable.

**Keywords:** theological determinism, cultural determinism, psychological determinism, free will, patriarchy, culturalism.

Predestined fate versus control over one's destiny has been a constant topic of debate for philosophers from time immemorial, and without any concrete evidence to substantiate any one claim, the only inference is further debate on these abstract ideas. If one takes "theological determinism" as the driving force in life, that one cannot control one's destiny, then it amounts to turning towards pessimistic view of life, where every action of beings is preordained and thus we become mere puppets in the hands of destiny. Cultural determinism on the other hand concerns itself with the society and the culture that an individual is part of and advocates that an individual's choices are largely dependent on the culture s/he is part of. However, this too seems to be lopsided view of looking at life, because in day to day life one comes across myriad of choices available to him/her which are independent of culturalism. Psychological determinism views human actions from Freudian lens and delves into psyche of beings to look for the role of unconscious in the day to day actions of human beings. However, apart from these different forces of determinism, many a times an individual makes choices based on his/her will and it's through his/her choice that the future action takes place. There are times, when an individual mulls over his/her choices, sometimes succeeds in

creating an alternative situation and depending on that the future course of action follows. Thus, there is “Free will” available to an individual and it plays a decisive role in shaping the individual’s life.

When it comes to Deshpande’s novels one can get an expansive view of determinism versus free will as can be seen in *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *That Long Silence* and *A Matter of Time*. Though most of her novels are replete with the theme of determinism and free will, it is in *A Matter of Time* that one gets constant struggle between the two themes as reflected in the behaviour of various characters. Deshpande’s novels are generally known for the individuality of her characters rather than the incidents or plots of the novels. Saru from *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Indu from *Roots and Shadows* and Jaya from *That Long Silence* have become immortalized due to their lifelike character. One noteworthy point about *A Matter of Time* is that it deviates from Deshpande’s other novels by making Gopal as the focal point of the novel. The theme of determinism and free will runs through the entire novel beginning from the first part. The first part begins with Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad:

Maityei, said Yajnavalkya, verily I  
am about to go forth from this  
state (of householder).

The readers at once are acquainted with Gopal’s, the householder’s decision to leave his family. Gopal, who has been married to Sumi for twenty-two years decides to break free of the marital bond for no substantive reason. Their marriage was considered as the ideal marriage by people surrounding them, as Gopal was considered to be the ultimate embodiment of what a loving and caring husband should be. Their blissful union was perfected by their three daughters: Seventeen-year old Aru, Fourteen-year old Charu and twelve-year old Seema. All except Sumi are unable to understand Gopal’s abrupt behaviour. Sumi, even while marrying Gopal, knew that the protentional to walk out on her and their children was always there in Gopal. His unexpected quirks, even when he was deeply in love with Sumi, such as debating on the concept “Sa-hriday” which according to him was an impossible notion, were indications of his dual state of mind. Therefore, for Sumi, when others were trying to find reason for his deserting her and her daughters, she knew that the reason lay inside him and the reason was “him”.

Kalyani, Sumi’s mother is a firm believer in theological determinism which she terms as “fate”. The philosopher Kevin Timpe defines theological determinism as:

According to theological determinism, God's willing an event to happen is both necessary and sufficient for that event occurring. The first part of theological determinism (i.e., God's willing an event to happen is necessary for that event occurring") means that no event happens without God's willing that particular event to happen. The second part of this doctrine (i.e. God's willing that event to happen is sufficient for that event occurring") means that nothing else is God's act of willing, and what all that act entails, is needed in addition to what God actively wills to guarantee or ensure that the event in question happens. In other words, if God wills a particular event, nothing else can prevent that event from occurring. (9)

Sumi has heard her mother often using "fate" or "destiny" for everything, right from milk boiling over, to a sudden death and therefore doesn't take it seriously. According to Sumi, 'It was something innocuous, a domestic pet, a cat that lay snoozing in your home. Harmless, though there was always the chance that you could trip over it, fall and hurt yourself' (26). Sumi's return to the Big House after Gopal's desertion, makes her daughters and sister indulge in blame games thinking of various possibilities behind their separation. They think of the usual quarrel between Gopal and Sumi, Sumi taking her marriage casually to the extent of Aru blaming herself for arguing with her father over his resignation from professorship in college. However, Kalyani simply throws the word "fate" for Sumi's present condition, because for Kalyani:

Everything is preordained, we are only the instruments. Even Bhagiratha's bringing the Ganga down to earth is not, as it is to Gopal, a magnificent act of human determination, but the story of a man playing out his destined role. (93)

Sumi doesn't like her mother's constant preoccupation with destiny's hand for their troubles in life. The extreme religiosity of her mother has made Sumi turn to atheism. When her mother tries to pray to Ganpati idol to protect the family, Sumi questions her, 'He doesn't do such a good job looking after the women in the family, does he? (115). However, Kalyani, who is steeped in her ideology of theological determinism retorts, though meekly, 'What can even the gods do against our destinies?' (116). Sumi didn't wish to return to her parents' house after the separation, to witness the pastness of the past of her parents, but sheer desperation of the circumstances makes her retrace her steps back to the house she always wished to avoid. It is in this house that Shripati, Kalyani's husband is living without any communication with Kalyani. Shripati was not willing to marry Kalyani, but was compelled to forgo his free will by his dominating sister Manorama. Jordan Gray while commenting on Free will as against determinism writes:

Free will is evident in our power to decide or choose what we will do with the circumstances we are creating during the experience of a lifetime. That same freedom is available to us in the choices that we make moment by moment... Having free will includes the ability to choose to abandon the outline and go your own way. (chapter-8)

Manorama's wielding of her own will by suppressing that of her brother's and her own daughter's was because she herself had become the victim of cultural determinism, the culture which demanded a son for a woman to have respectable place in the society. Wikipedia defines cultural determinism as, 'Cultural determinism is the belief that the culture in which we are raised determines who we are at emotional and behavioural levels'. Manorama's inability to produce a male heir who could have fetched her a respectable position in the society and would also have firmly secured her property, makes her coerce her own younger brother to marry Kalyani against his wishes. Kalyani too feared her withdrawn and stern uncle and thus, when Sumi looks at their wedding picture, she feels an uneasy feeling. She thinks, 'It seems wrong somehow, unnatural, even slightly obscene' (26).

Sumi is also a product of cultural determinism, which is reflected when Aru suggests her to divorce Gopal. She replies, 'what? Get a divorce? I am not interested' (61). Sumi knows the implications of being a divorcee in the society that she was part of. However, she is also pragmatic in nature and wishes to move on in life instead of indulging in the past, which according to her is now irrecoverable. She refuses to compare her separation from Gopal with her parents' separation. She feels that her parents' future was written on the day they got married and that there was no astrologer or horoscope needed to predict their destiny. Alliance which was forced upon them was doomed from the beginning. Shripati and Kalyani remained as husband and wife only to keep appearances in the society. Reflecting once on Kalyani's status she feels:

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, for the deprivation of a man's love, for the feel of his body against yours, ...but her Kumkum is intact and she can move in the company of women with the pride of a wife. (167)

When her parents' third child, a mentally retarded boy gets lost at the age of four, Shripati conveniently blames Kalyani for it and then there remains complete silence between the couple till the end. Kalyani silently suffers and resigns herself to her fate. The society that she was part of makes her internalize the patriarchal ideology and she never utters a voice of

protest against the treatment meted out to her by her husband. Kalyani's predicament has been aptly summed up by Shri N.B. Misal:

Her predicament is that the woman's body is not only a text of culture. It is a focus of social control, and the site of violence, exclusion and abuse. In this social construction of body, the subject is denied agency and is compelled to accept her passivity. For nearly thirty-five years she remains second sex, a passive silent sufferer. Her body becomes a site of 'colonizing power. (16)

Sumi finds herself in a situation which was the cause of Gopal's using his free will, without giving any inexplicable justification for his action. Sumi was a working woman, but willingly became a homemaker after the birth of her third daughter to take care of her family. The society that Gopal and Sumi were part of was yet a deep-rooted patriarchal society and unknowingly both had internalized the value system passed on to them from generation of culturalism. Gopal's desertion makes Sumi realize the huge responsibility of having three daughters sans any male child. The second part of the novel confirms her predicament in the society:

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

Though Gopal was always a loving father towards all his daughters, Sumi remembers that as their daughters were growing, it was also Gopal's gradual withdrawal from them, instead of forming a close father-daughter bond. He reluctantly responds the reason for his withdrawal, as, 'It is not easy to be the only male in a family of females. You feel so-so-... 'you feel so shut out' (60). Sumi goes through female phobia syndrome even at her parents' house. Her daughters accept the unwritten rule of the house of not disturbing their grandfather, who remains in his solitary state and thus willingly accept the subordinate role assigned to them. This becomes apparent when Nikhil, Premi's eight-year old son visits them. He abandons all the rules and surprisingly is not chided by either Shripati or the other family members. Kalyani, the firm believer of destiny is also steeped in culturalism and therefore when Aru, her oldest granddaughter tells her decision not to get married and move away from the family, after the bitter experience of her parents, Kalyani gently reminds her, 'Of course you will. Daughters don't belong. All three of you birds will fly away to your own nests' (198).

Sumi knows that unlike her mother, Gopal though a product of cultural determinism is also a firm believer of free will. According to him destiny is just us and therefore inescapable, because we can never escape ourselves. Gopal's ideology is that we walk on chalked lines drawn by our own selves. Nonetheless, unlike Kalyani, who submissively resigns herself to the situation offered to her and in the process become a victim of culturalism, Sumi refuses to feel victimized by Gopal's action. Though she lets Gopal have his will, she also feels that if Gopal is shaped by his being what he is, what about the girls and her? Gopal's choices in life has changed his daughters' and Sumi's life. It's only her realistic look which stops her from probing this dualism of Gopal. Yet, she feels:

[I]f I meet Gopal I will ask him one question no one has thought of. 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?... 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 this society, turn your back on everything in your life? Will you be able to give me an answer to this? (27)

The Society that Sumi is part of squarely blames her for Gopal's deserting the family. Kalyani goes as a supplicant to Gopal and requests him to forgive Sumi, if she was not a good wife to him. She even goes to the extent of blaming herself for not being a good mother, who could never teach her daughters how to be a good wife, simply because she herself could not be the one for her husband. Premi, Sumi's younger sister, who too is emotionally disturbed due to Gopal's action urges him to go back to his family, because she feels responsible for the wellbeing of her sister and her daughters. Devki, Sumi's cousin even organizes a party so that Gopal and Sumi can meet and discuss the issues plaguing their separation. Aru, Charu and Seema, Gopal's daughters in their own ways try to beseech their father to come back home. Thus, the cultural society absolves Gopal of his action and holds Sumi responsible for his incompressible action. It is Sumi, who people come to sympathize with, because Gopal's desertion is not just a tragedy, it is both shame and disgrace for the family.

People close to the couple congregate like mourners to console Sumi, who herself becomes an enigma, because she too was not prepared for this stage in her life. However, instead of cursing her fate and accepting everybody's sympathy, Sumi decides to use her free will and tries to create a future for her. The first thing she does is to learn to ride a scooter, with the help of a tenant of her parents' house. Gradually she starts looking for a job as well

as a place for herself. Her creative talent fetches her a teaching job in a residential school. Dr. S Prasanna Sree while writing on Sumi comments:

Sumi of *A Matter of Time* gradually emancipates herself as a new independent woman from the utter desolation and trauma of being a deserted wife...Unlike any other in her place, she has the generosity to gracefully free her husband from marital bonds without venting ill-feelings. Her desertion, instead of making her an emotional wreck, has surprisingly brought out the read, hidden strength in her. (122)

When everything seems to be going fine, again the much dreaded “fate” intervenes in the form of death of Sumi and Shripati in an unfortunate accident and thus the wheels of fortune once again changes for the family. The third and last section begins with Upanishad:

Whatever desires are hard to attain in  
this world of mortals, ask for all those  
desires at thy will. O Nachiketas, (pray)  
ask not about death.

Thus, Deshpande like Thomas Hardy brings into focus the forces of destiny as always overruling life on earth irrespective of individual choices that humans make to carve their individual paths. Sumi’s decisive action against her fate imposed on her not by divine forces, but by human action, eventually gets crushed by theological determinism.

Gopal, who in the true sense can be called as the first male protagonist of Deshpande’s novels, whose action begins and ends the novel suffers from identity crisis, which has been brilliantly portrayed by his interior monologues. Gopal accepts the feeling of emptiness within him as the main reason behind his moving away from Sumi and his daughters. His decision to leave Sumi has not been abrupt as it sounds to the people around him, but a well-thought action, as he himself pointed out to Kalyani, when she beseeches him to come back home. He tells her, ‘I thought of everything before I took this step. Do you think, Amma, I haven’t? (48). He feels helpless as nobody is able to understand his psyche except Sumi. S. Prasanna Sree, while commenting on Gopal writes, ‘The existential alienation which Gopal experiences can be offered as one of the most possible reasons for his transformation leading to his inexplicable desertion of the family’ (112). Aru, in her peevishness berates him for marrying and having children, if finally, he had to desert them. However, as far as Gopal is concerned he feels that marrying Sumi was his own doing and at that point of time he knew that he was right. His matrimonial life with Sumi was the blissful stage. He feels that at one point in his life, he wanted it all, his wife and children and he gave himself fully in that stage of his life.

Gopal, wholeheartedly supports feminism and feels that rules are always against women and it's time to change these rules. However, as a supporter of equal rights for women, he is not able to understand how feminists can argue that a man is responsible for his family. According to Gopal, if one rejects patriarchy, then one must also reject all those things based on patriarchy. Gopal, unlike the brute face of patriarchy, openly admits to Surekha, the lawyer, who comes to counsel him on suggestion of Aru about his deep buried psychological fear after the tragic death of his parents. He also accepts the accusation of being a coward, when he was attacked by his students for writing a controversial article. His gradual moving away from his family is reasoned by him as, 'our journeys are always separate, that's how they're meant to be. If we travel together for a while, that's only a coincidence' (212). Gopal feels that 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. Gopal's views on womanhood and considering himself as an outsider points out to his duality between psychological determinism and free will. He is not able to cast himself off of his psychological fear buried during his childhood. The role of unconscious desires has been aptly pointed out by Freud as, 'I have already taken the liberty of pointing out to you that there is within you a deeply rooted belief in psychic freedom and choice, that this belief is quite unscientific, and that it must give ground before the claims of a determinism which governs even mental life' (39).

Stream of consciousness technique used by Deshpande reveals Gopal's unconscious thought process and readers get to know that Gopal has constantly faced the identity crisis from his childhood and though he tries to repress his psychological fear, he realizes that he is not able to free himself from this burden of the past. Outwardly, he comes across as a firm believer in a free will of an individual and doesn't subscribe to Kalyani's advocacy of cosmic or theological determinism. He feels that:

[T]he plot of humankind evolves through our lives, it is the human will that sets things in motion. Even if the pattern that finally emerges is nothing like what was intended, even if the human will fails in achieving its object, it can never be discounted. Human history according to him, is fired by human desire. 'The beginning lies in desire' - what the *Natyashthras* says about the plot of drama is for him, true about the drama of humankind as well. (94)

Though Gopal supports and believes in human will and desire, he is also a product of cultural determinism in the sense that he firmly believes that we are shaped by the society and the culture that we live in and thus our views or perspectives are based on the ideology of the

culture that we imbibe. However, his belief in free will makes him select certain choices and when he feels defeated by the response, he turns towards defeatism. The reason behind his resigning from the post of professor of History was because he faced severe criticism from his students, when he published the erotic poems of a saint-poet. The Brahmin community felt angered by Gopal's sudden discovery of the erotic poems of the so called pure untarnished saint. Though Gopal himself is Brahmin, he doesn't follow Brahmanical diktats and the derision he receives for his writing is accusing him as "bastard of a Brahmin". The revelation of the alternative identity of a saint-poet made his critics reveal Gopal's past identity as a child of a bastard, which was in no way related to his present identity as a professor. Instead of giving a fight, Gopal chooses to surrender and resigns from his post from college. His past begins to haunt him and he retreats into his reflection about his parents' unusual marriage. His father had married the older brother's widow and that Sudha, his cousin was the daughter of the older brother of Gopal's father. The couple had to elope their native place to escape the scandal and later were killed in a truck accident. The past memories keep coming back to him through dreams and though he tries to live in the present, by making his choices, the invective used against him by calling him as "a bastard son of a Brahmin" takes him back to his past and eventually to existential nihilism. He reflects:

Emptiness I realized then, is always waiting for us. The nightmare we most dread, of waking up among total strangers, is one we can never escape... All human ties are only a masquerade. Someday, some time, the pretence fails us and we have to face the truth. Like Sudha did. And I. (52)

Gradually he could no longer believe that there was meaning to his life and this feeling of alienation made him take a decision to separate from Sumi and his children. He confides in Premi:

You remember the Yaksha's question to Yudhishtira: what is the greatest wonder in this world? And Yudhishtira's answer was? We see people die and yet we go on as if we are going to live forever. Yes, it's true, that is the greatest marvel this world holds, it's the miracle. In fact, it's the secret of life itself.... The miracle failed for me and there was nothing left. You've got be the Buddha for that emptiness to be filled with compassion for the world. For me there was just emptiness. (134)

Gopal understands that he had not been fair to Sumi. He knows that he should have spoken to her earlier and given her some hint of what was happening to him. At the same time his psychological state makes him reflect that there is never the right time in daily life

for these kinds of things. Deshpande in one of her interviews while commenting on Gopal opines:

I never thought about Gopal's gender. He was like a projection of my own thoughts. You put a little bit of yourself in every one of your characters...His action which was inexplicable to everyone was perfectly clear to me. He may not know exactly why he did what he did, and I know that he does not know. (59)

Sumi, who had now moved on in life, in her second visit informs him of her plan to shift to Devgiri to a residential school. She also speaks about their past life as a married couple and reminds him that when they got married she was only eighteen and he was twenty-six. She makes him know that even before they got married he had made her promise that at any time if either of them wanted to be free, the other would let go. She didn't understand the repercussions of this promise at that time, as she was too naïve to understand the gravity of the promise. However, now after twenty-two years she informs him that she has kept the promise and thus did not stop him. Sumi says:

I knew exactly when it happened. And I knew I could not stop you. I could do nothing. When you left, I knew I would not question you, I would just let you go. None of them, not even our daughters, specially our daughters, could understand me...But now I know my life is not like my mother's. Our life, yours and mine, was complete. (221-222)

Gopal realizes that finally Sumi was setting him free as he desired from all his psychological burden of inflicting pain on her from their separation. However, when he finally receives the much-needed independency from his family, he doesn't feel ecstatic. He realizes that the space between them in the room was filled with desire of his body, which after so many months was still awake. This gets reflected from his attitude towards her. When she prepares to leave, Gopal asks, 'Must you?' (224). He feels himself caught between his unconscious desire and his will to renunciate all worldly desires. Later in the novel, Gopal's extremist thoughts on life, that it is nothing but a battle against death, a battle that we ultimately lose, also change after the accidental death of Sumi. He knows that Sumi's memories, the life lived with her will always remain with him and thus remarks, 'Whether our lives are long or short, we leave our marks on the world...Nothing is lost, each moment remains, encapsulated in time' (238).

## **Conclusion**

The narrative which is initiated by Gopal's supposedly irrational action, ends with his accepting the reconciliation between fate and free will. Seeing Kalyani and Aru, the two faces

of past and future make him reflect about the conflict between fate and free will. He feels that even if it is indeed true that we are bound to our destinies and there is no point struggling against them, it is also true that we do not submit passively or cravenly. Our choices and decisions in life make it a fight which is dignified and reflects our strength. Thus, one can see that Deshpande, through her central character brings out the eternal conflict between fate and determinism in *A Matter of Time*.

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