

Delineation of Women's Silence and Endurance through Four Generations of a Family: An Analysis of Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande, a widely acclaimed name in Indian English Fiction is better known for the engrossing themes of her novels. Her each and every novel starting from 'The Dark Hold No Terrors' 1980 to her latest novel 'Strangers to Ourselves' 2015 revolves round a theme which is significant & prominent to the time. In her novels she deals with the issues & situations, women handle in their day today life. The life of an ordinary, middle class educated woman, her needs & desires, her traumas and turbulences, her celebrations, her assertion, everything is manifested in her novels. Through her novels, she mainly hits at the notion of patriarchy deeply rooted in the fabric of our society. However, acquiring a positive undertone, she delineate through her characters that the roots of patriarchy are gradually shaken. These days women are aware of the worth of their existence. Now, they don't underestimate themselves. Through her characters, Deshpande projects that the silence of Indian women since ancient time has become an abetment to cruelty of all types against her. Women live a traumatic life, as they are not vocal to their requirements. They feel inhibited to reveal their dreams, their career aspirations & are silent towards injustice done to them by society, their own family or relatives.

The aim of the research paper is to study & project the silence and endurance of women prevalent within four generations of a family. Through Shashi Deshpande's novel 'A Matter of Time' the readers observe as how women live in stress & fear throughout their life. They tolerate in silence. They are afraid of asking others to share their burden.

They hesitate to reveal their own requirements, accept responsibilities much more than their physical & mental capacities. At the cost of their own well being, they try to fulfill the needs of each & everyone in the family, resultantly, live an overstressed & miserable life.

Keywords: Silence, Endurance, Apathy, Patriarchy, Renunciation.

The novel 'A Matter of Time' by Shashi Deshpande was published in 1996. In the novel, the novelist presents the stark realism of Indian society by focusing the experiences of four generations of a family. Through her personages, she depicts the silence and endurance of women prevalent within four successive generations of a particular family. The novel opens with the grappling story of the protagonists Sumi (Sumitra) & Gopal and often shifts to the flashback to unravel the miserable life lived by Sumi's mother Kalyani, her grandmother, Manorama & subsequently her daughter, Aru. Moreover, the life episodes of Sumi's sister Premi are also shared with the readers. Aru, belonging to the fourth generation, is a prominent female character in the novel, representing contemporary woman in the novel. This is through the character of Aru that Deshpande indicates at the gradual shift in the mindset of society towards women. Dr. S. Evangeline rightly comments:

"The novel narrates the story of Manorama, Kalyani, Sumi and Aru. The relation women characters share with their men is filled with silence, absence or indifference."1.

Thus, in this novel we meet multiple female characters and only few male characters. Deshpande sensitively describes how these handfuls of men impinge the life of multiple women in the novel. It is due to their indifference, apathy and cruelty that the women suffer throughout their life. So, the issue that is raised in the novel is, how women are bound to live a cursed life generation after generation? Deshpande probes the situation, studies man-woman relationship & find out that the reason lies in the silence & endurance of women. She firmly asserts if a female child in the family watches her mother, grandmother or any other woman in the family to be subdued, subordinated or to be behaved derogatorily during the initial years of childhood, a wrong pattern regarding the status of women is imprinted on her young innocent mind. Then, how can she develop herself into a fortified being?

The theme of the novel 'A Matter of Time' is unraveled before the readers through an extract from Brhadaranyaka Upnishad. Deshpande quotes: "Maitreyi", said Yajnavalakya, verily I am about to go forth from this state of (householder)' .2

The story of Yajnavalakya and Maitreyi is analogical to the story of Gopal & Sumi in the novel. This apt quote given by the novelist, signals at the twist & turn of events, which have abruptly occurred in the life of the protagonists. The novelist describes that after twenty years of marriage, blessed with three daughters, now Gopal & Sumi have reached to their forties. At this stage, Gopal suddenly decides to leave the home. He also resigns from the job of a university professor and walks out leaving her wife & three daughters in a baffled state. Deshpande explains the matter that one day Gopal abruptly comes to Sumi & states his decision of renouncing home. At the time, Sumi was watching a movie titled 'Mera Naam Joker'. At this revelation of Gopal, the situation becomes uneasy for both of them. As Sumi waits for her husband to explain himself and Gopal is waiting for her reaction. Both of them realize that nothing is now remained to say. Deshpande beautifully dramatizes the situation by portraying a song of the clown in the background. While Gopal is telling his decision, the clown's song can be heard simultaneously in the background: 'Jeena Yahan Marna Yahan, Iske Siwa Jana Kahan'.³ Here a close affinity is established between Sumi & the clown, as the state of the clown in the song symbolically represents Sumi's situation in the novel. However, Gopal leaves the home and Sumi watches the movie till the end. Clown, the tragic doomed victim dies at the climax of the movie & Sumi goes to sleep while contemplating the tragic state of the clown. She realizes that she herself is befooled & victimized like the clown. Very touchingly, the novelist discloses that Sumi meets the same tragic death later on in the novel.

The very feeling that she is victimized starts to trouble her conscience at night, but as she wakes up in the midnight, she accommodates herself with the situation by finding herself alone on the bed. Till the next morning, she is much stabilized, as the situation is now crystal clear before her. Now, she is able to see the picture with detachment. She behaves normally in order to save her daughters from anguish & pain. Though she tells her daughters exactly what has happened yet tries to appear calm & composed. In this way, she tries to restore normalcy in the home. But, all her daughters are astonished & baffled as well to see their mother's casual routine. Aru, 17 years old, is

mature enough to understand the panic behind the situation. She feels disorientation of being lost. She knows that something has ended for her, for all of them, that day. But, surprisingly enough, their mother was answering all their questions with patience. There is no irritation, no sign of distress & anger from her part. Their mother's silence & endurance, at this crisis situation trouble her daughters. Here the novelist perceives the truth behind the mask of Sumi:

“Sumi, despite her façade of normality, has a quality about her—a kind of blankness—that make them uneasy”.⁴

Soon after Sumi's father approached them to make all of them shift to their parental house known as Big House. It is during their stay in the parental house that the reality about the relationship of Sumi's parents', Kalyani & Shripati, is revealed before the readers. Along with the relationship of Sumi's parents, the true nature of the father's relation with his daughters Sumi & Premi is also revealed. Shashi Deshpande reports that Kalyani, Sumi's mother is not informed anything about the state of Sumi. Being ignorant, she becomes perplexed on the arrival of Sumi with family yet makes all the arrangements. She is confused with everybody's silence. It is only late at night, that Seema, the younger daughter of Sumi cries loudly revealing the actual reason of their arrival. Kalyani looks at Sumi for confirmation. While confirmed, she is at once reminded of an old hurt. Being overwhelmed, she reacts violently. She cries out:

“no my God, not again'. She begins to cry, sounding so much like an animal in pain that Aru covers her ears against the sound”.⁵

Kalyani's reaction makes the readers aware that she herself has gone through the similar kind of pain in her life. Therefore, to appease the curiosity of the readers, the horrifying story of Kalyani's silence & suffering and Shripati's apathy & indifference is unraveled before the readers. Anju Bala rightly comments:

“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.⁶”

Throughout her life, Kalyani makes compromises one after another and remains silent. It is miserable to think that for each & every miss happenings in her life,

she never blames anyone, rather believes that fate is responsible for everything good or bad in our life. In her view, everything is predestined, as fate decides our predicament. That's why when she comes to know about Sumi, first she remains silent and then suddenly speaks: 'Fate' & walks out of the room, leaving everyone in silence. Deshpande ironically remarks:

“Sumi who has heard Kalyani say ‘fate’ or ‘destiny’ for everything, from the milk-boiling over to a sudden death, has never been able to take the word seriously. 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.”⁷.

Thus, the readers come to know that for Kalyani, everything is preordained; the human beings are only the instruments. Throughout her life she curses her fate. Deshpande projects that Kalyani actually suffers in her life due to her husband's hostile attitude. She is punished for the sin, which she has never committed. The novelist explores Kalyani's life by telling the readers that Kalyani's marriage with Shripati was a mismatch, as he was, in actual, her maternal uncle. Her mother, Manorama took this decision intentionally to grasp her paternal property, as it is seen that many women's whole life is sacrificed due to the family issue of property. The tragedy does not end here. The only son of Kalyani and Shripati, who was mentally retarded, is lost somewhere on a railway station. The narrator tells the readers that he was very well grown physically & Kalyani found it hard to manage. Whatever be the reason, Shripati tries to search him for a long time, but, no avail. From that incident Shripati never forgives his wife assuming as if it was his personal loss & breaks away all relation with her. It is suggested that throughout their life they were not on talking terms. Kalyani was living amidst this oppressive silence during last thirty-five years. At last, she returns to her father's house. The narrator describes the pain & suffering of Kalyani:

“They (the family) 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 acts of cruelty.”⁸.

All the daughters were oblivious of the truths of Kalyani's life & they were feeling an awkward blankness in their house since their father's sudden escape. Aru, being mature, is much desperate about everything. She wants to do something to set

everything right, but she is confused about her line of action. Being sensitive at this tender age, she also feels insulted and disgraced, when the people talk otherwise about her family. S. Deshpande remarks:

“Gopal's desertion is not just a tragedy; it is both a shame & a disgrace. There was a time when a man could have walked out of his home and the seamless whole of the joint family would have enclosed his wife and children, covered his absence. Now the rent in the fabric, gaping wide, is there for all to see.”⁹

Everyone in the family heartily hopes for the possibility of Gopal's come back, they're alert at every phone ring, knock at the door. Deshpande says: “Even Sumi, despite her apparent stoicism, is not immune from this hope.”¹⁰ Aru with her sisters is often lost in the joyful memories & misses the light atmosphere of the house in the presence of their father. The narrator reports that everybody is suffering silently of the anguish of Gopal's departure. Aru seems much more sensitive. That's why Aru reacts violently, when Sumi seems heedless about what the people talked about their family & when one day she herself talks harshly about Gopal, while talking with Ramesh. Being irritated, she frankly tells Ramesh that how long they can hide the situation from the world. They had to say that Gopal has walked out on his wife and children. Aru's reaction to her mother's statement is violent. She says:

“That's wonderful. You don't care about his having gone, you don't care where he is, you don't care what people think—but I care, yes, I do, I care about Papa having left us, I care about not having our own house. I don't want to live like this, as if we're sitting on a railway platform, I want my home back, I want my father back....”¹¹

What could Sumi do at this state? Helpless she walks out in silence. The reader is bound to contemplate how one step of Gopal impinges the life of multiple women in the novel. Sumi reflects on the situation & tries to find out the answer of the question that was troubling her conscience as why this happened to her & her daughters? This thought reminded her of the theory in which Gopal firmly believed ‘Destiny is just us, and therefore inescapable, because we can never escape ourselves’.¹² Sumi simply believes Gopal's theory at that time, thinking it fits better, as It is your being, your personality that decides your destiny. Then reevaluates the theory:

“If Gopal’s life is shaped by his being what he is, what about us, the girls and me? We are here because of his actions: how does this fit in?”¹³

These questions trouble her conscience. Why this happened to her daughters? What was her fault? How a man in this age of acquisition and possession walks out on his family and all? How can a man being a part of a family a society turn his back on everything in his life? All these questions are left unanswered by the narrator, persuading the readers to contemplate. However, this one step of Gopal deserts the life of many. Each & everyone in the family is overburdened & stressed. The novelist describes the state of the family after Gopal’s sudden escape:

“They congregate like mourners after a death in the family—but a death in a distant land, a death without a body. There is a blank space where the body should have been. None of the stock phrases, none of the comforting formulas, fit. Even to speak of what has happened as a tragedy is to make it one ... There is awkwardness about the whole thing, and discomfort and uneasiness pervade more than grief and anger.”¹⁴

The novelist especially describes the state of Sumi by saying that though she shows no outward sign of distress and discomfort, but the girls notice a change in her behavior. They notice that sometimes she touches them, hold their hands, smooth their hairs, caress them, as trying to express her love & concern for her daughters. The readers can realize that in this way she was trying to comfort her daughters, as she was fully aware of the emptiness & uneasiness pervaded in the life of her daughters. In the same way, Aru also feels much more responsible towards her mother & sisters. Sumi notices that suddenly & unexpectedly, she has moved to a somber gravity from a childlike playfulness. Her carefree, childish nature was now a thing of the past. Sumi says: “Aru is wholly steeped in earnestness. She has taken on a great many of the chores at home.... But there is more to it. She wants to be man of the family.”¹⁵ She takes initiative to accompany her mother to a dentist & tries to do so many things to fill the blankness; Gopal has left in their lives. Deshpande remarks: “Perhaps what Aru is trying is to steer her mother and sisters through the stormy passage of change.”¹⁶

In this way, the readers feel that Aru has become more sensitive & caring to her family, especially her mother, that’s why when Charu speaks disrespectfully to Sumi. Aru retorts by saying that just because our father has left her, it doesn’t give anyone a

license to insult her or to be rude to her. It doesn't mean that she is worthless. She is also very angry with his father & expresses her anger, when she goes to meet him, Gopal at once recognizes that she has come prepared for bloodless duel, as she directly comes to the point telling him that it is due to him that they are suffering with the feeling of displacement, the sense of shame & disgrace & facing the derogatory remarks of the people. Aru coldly blames her father for deserting the life of all. She even calls him 'a callous father', 'a crude husband' and an 'unfeeling man'. Very bluntly she asks him: 'Why did you get married at all, why did you have children'?¹⁷ She even advises Sumi that she should see a lawyer to get a divorce, & demand for maintenance. She speaks harshly to Sumi by saying that she is making it too easy for him, as she is letting him get away with it. She expresses her voice of dissent:

"He is getting off scot-free. It is not right. He must be made to realize what he's done....."¹⁸ At this, Sumi calmly replies: I'm not interested. I just want to get on with my life.....Let him go."¹⁹

But Aru cries unyieldingly:

"Let him go? As if he's a – mere acquaintance or somebody with whom we've had a small understanding? He's our father, Ma, he's your husband. How can you dismiss it so lightly? I don't understand you at all"²⁰

Thus, Shashi Deshpande mentions that contemporary women are vocal & aggressive towards any injustice. They are logical & practical enough to understand & deal each & every type of situation. In this regard many remarkable examples can be quoted from the novel. While staying in her parental house with her daughters, once Sumi becomes restless about her daughters suppressed voice. So, advocating for her daughters' liberty & dignity she firmly comments: "I don't want my daughters to live with a hand clasped over their mouths, like Premi and I had to."²¹ Gopal is also afraid of facing Aru when she comes to see him. With Aru's cold & dispassionate look, he immediately assesses that her questions will be like the Yaksha's questions, which he has to answer truthfully & wisely. Gopal says:

"it was not only her questions that daunted me, it was her look as well, the clear eyed, judging gaze of the young female, weighing me up, finding me wanting."²²

Shashi Deshpande describes that while on the one hand we notice Aru's rebellious attitude towards her father, as she is not ready to compromise with the situation at any condition, on the other Sumi rationally handles the situation & makes up her mind to focus on the future of her family. Another reason for reconciliation with situation is that she has no false hope of Gopal's comeback. That's why she is now anxious of only about her daughters.

During their stay in Sumi's parental house the girls seem curious as well as gloomy due to awkward situations in the house. While living with their grandparents, Aru & her sisters notice a threatening silence all over the house. This is the first time that they get a chance to closely observe the relation of their grandparents, about which Sumi has never spoken to them previously. Some questions trouble their innocent minds. They think why their grandfather is so indifferent to the whole family? Why he remains only in upper attic & never comes down to join the rest of us? Why does he never speak to Grandma, her wife, who is so frightened of him that becomes alert even at his slight movement? They feel it awkward that when he is required of something, he only rings the bell. In this way, he controls her Grandma from a distance. Aru thinks what could be the blunder that her Grandma has committed for such treatment? Why she is forced to live this miserable life? Sumi calls her poor Amma. Curious enough, she wants a clarification of all this. At this, Sumi is lost in memory. Through the memories of Sumi, Deshpande reveals the actual nature of their relationship that they (Kalyani & Shripati) are husband & wife, no doubt, but to see them together even in a picture, is odd and unnatural, as they are totally mismatch for marriage. Sumi suddenly reminds of a classic post wedding picture of Kalyani & Shripati formally posed against a dark background. She recalls:

“.....the bride sitting in a chair, the groom by her,.....The bride is wearing a heavy silk, the sari much too heavy for her scrawny girlishness. Her left arm....held up by a brooch, is childishly thin and the weight of the heavy chain and necklaces she is wearing seems to make her neck droop.The man on the other hand is stern, his eyes hooded, arms folded across his chest in usual 'manly pose' demanded by the photographers for such pictures. But the sternness here is not a pose, it is real. And the way he is standing, he gives the impression of being by himself, wholly unaware of the girl sitting by him. His wife.” 23

Thus, with the portrayal of the authoritative character of Sumi's father Deshpande hits at the notion of patriarchy, which is the predominant theme of her all other novels. Sumi also indicates at the notion of patriarchy, when she describes, how she feels, when Premi is blessed with a son. The adoration of the male child in family & society is drawn with lively description of Nikhil's (Premi's son) naming ceremony. So much importance is given to Premi & her son in the family that Sumi feels her & her daughters as interlopers or intruders in her parents' house. She realizes that she & her daughters have no right to be there. They feel like a parasite, as there is only the male child who belongs.

Kalyani, Sumi's mother has gone through the similar pain in her life. The novelist reveals that Manorama, Kalyani's mother was always disappointed with her, as she wanted a son & Kalyani was born instead. For Manorama, she was the visible symbol of their failure to have a son. That's why, she was never given importance since her childhood, except the occasion, when she gave birth to a son. Deshpande describes that there was a great rejoicing in the family and a grand ceremony was performed to celebrate the naming ceremony of her son. Even a red-carpet was put by Kalyani's bedside to keep her feet. The novelist remarks:

“The naming ceremony was the occasion of a lifetime. The house was full of guests, fragrant with flowers, gleaming with silverware. The poor were fed and the dustbin in the street was overflowing with used banana-leaf plates for two whole days.”²⁴

The novelist ironically reports that after a grand celebration, the son turned out to be an idiot. Kalyani came back to her parents' house with her two daughters, disgraced, deserted. Her mother Manorama assumed her return as a disgrace to the family. Since then, she never participated in any public event. Soon after her arrival, her father had a stroke & died in a short duration. Since then, Manorama held her daughter responsible for everything wrong happened to her. Manorama babbles: “You are my enemy; you were born to make my life miserable”.²⁵The narrator says that those words of her mother echoed in Kalyani's ears every night. The comment of Ms. Ritu is quite appropriate in this regard:

“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 women has managed to come out of her predefined gender thresholds whenever she got a chance and even out shown her male counterpart.”²⁶

After exploring the horrifying silence & suffering existing in the relation of Gopal & Sumi’, Kalyani & Shripati, Deshpande further portrays the character of Manorama. Though Manorama is dead by the time the novel starts, her presence can be felt throughout the novel through her lively portrait hung on the wall. The novelist says that this is only through her daughter, Kalyani, that her story is narrated before the readers. Kalyani reported that her mother had given birth to two daughters and after too many miscarriages it was again a daughter. The doctor declared that she would have no more children. Therefore, her husband Vithalrao was pressurized by society especially by his own uncle Narasikaka to remarry, adopt a son or one of his grandsons to inherit the property right. But Vithalrao, being a modern man rejected this advice, but, since then Manorama could never overcome the fear of her husband marrying again. Throughout her life she lived in terror. Dr. S Evangeline rightly comments:

“Manorama, could never get over her fear that her husband might marry again; because, she could never give him a son. Kalyani, though not so beautiful yet intelligent and good in studies. Because of her mother’s insecurities she was not allowed to complete her studies. Her education was stopped abruptly and was married to Manorama’s only brother Shripati. This marriage was also fretful devised to keep the property in the family and, so she forces Shripati to marry Kalyani.”²⁷

Besides portraying the silence of married couples of four generations the silence in the relations of father and daughters is also highlighted. The readers are already aware that Kalyani & Shripati are blessed with two daughters, Sumi & Premi. But both sisters have been lived as a deprived child by birth, deprived of their father’s love, attention & care. They are treated as unwanted. Someone who was required was (the son) who was lost. That’s why their father breaks all relation with them, the womenfolk. He always lived in upper attic & the girls are forbidden to go upstairs. Frightened, both the sisters rarely go upstairs, and even if they go, they used to meet a blank stare from their father and the question: ‘Why are you here’²⁸

Premi says that the question always puts a question mark on her existence. After marriage she tells her husband, Anil that her father never spoke to her, until she was ten. She recalls that she was called up by her father, only to get informed about her marriage, which was settled with the son of his father's colleague. When Premi comes her home after her marriage, he only asks about the well being of Anil, her husband, Nikhil her son, and her father-in-law (the men of importance) Premi tells: 'he speaks to her—no, not as if she is his daughter,.... But as if she is an acquaintance'. 29 Premi further elaborates that after marriage when she comes to Anil's home, she is quite surprised at the atmosphere in her in-law's house. At Anil's home, the family members talked to each other cordially, touch and hug so easily, use words of endearment so casually, while she never ever has seen so cordial relations and jovial atmosphere in her family. Sadly, she tells Anil the truth of her family:

“The truth was a father who stayed in his room, who never came out, never spoke to you, a mother who put her hand on your mouth so that you did not cry out....”30

These early years' experiences were so marked on Premi's mind that she has grown up into a stiff, uneasy, low confident child, unable to express herself. That's why when Aru informs Premi, her Mavshi about the indifferent & careless attitude of Gopal towards Sumi & the daughters & also about his decision of walk out. She feels helpless, as throughout her life, she herself has endured the callous treatment of her father. So there was nothing new. It was like a drawbridge into his (father's) own past. Woefully, she remarks: “Nothing has changed, nothing ever changes here. I was a fool to imagine I could do something.” 31

Thus, there are three generations of women with their repressive silence and suffocating life & the fourth one in the guise of Aru & her sisters, thinking, understanding, evaluating, affecting, despairing & rebelling. The same predicament at last comes, for which Sumi feared of previously in the novel. Deshpande clarifies the situation by telling the readers that one day while talking with Gopal, Sumi was much worried for her daughters' future. Analyzing her past, she becomes worried for her daughter's future. She senses:

“Kalyani's past which she has contained within herself, careful never to let it spill out, has nevertheless entered into us, Premi & me, it has stained our

bones,.....And will this , what is happening to me now, become part of my daughters too? Will I burden them with my past and my mother's as well?" 32

This is what happens in the end, Aru becomes pessimistic & hopeless about her future. She earnestly speaks to her Premi Mavshi: "I've been thinking about marriage a great deal, Premi Mavshi. What's there in it? I mean look at Amma and now Sumi.....What do you get out of it"?³³ She even finds Kalyani's silence inexplicable, as why did she not defend herself? Aru is completely shattered & speaks in great dismay:

"When I was a child, I used to think that as you grow older, you become wiser, more sensible that you can cope with things better because you know so much more. But in Heaven, what a muddle! What's the point going on if that's all we can do, go on muddling forever? It seems pointless. I'm not sure I want to go on." 34

As per Usha Bande:

"There are three generation 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."³⁵

To conclude it can be said that the novelist has drawn a continuity of the chain of agony & repression. All the three generations portrayed in the novel meet the same tragic predicament more or less, affecting the fourth one. An air of gravity links them to each other. The readers can notice the sudden flashes of resemblance, connecting the three women, (Manorama, Sumi & Kalyani) the three different generations, facing the similar circumstances & thus creating a sense of continuity in the novel.

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