

Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* (1996): Journey as an Archetypal Pattern of Life

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Article History: Submitted-28/01/2021, Revised-19/02/2021, Accepted-21/02/2021, Published-28/02/2021.

Abstract:

Since times immemorial, life of every individual has been viewed as a journey, a quest or a continuous progression towards a goal. Life, as a journey, can be externally directed or an internal exploration leading to self-realization or self-actualization. The process of self-discovery follows the patterns that lead to the seeker becoming an authentic being. Some few examples of this are present in the myths, legends and epics across cultures e.g., journey of Odysseus in *Odyssey*, that of Aeneas in *Aeneid*, the spiritual pilgrimage of Christian in the *Pilgrims Progress*, the journey of Gautam Buddha towards *nirvana* etc. Shashi Deshpande, as an astute explorer of Indian mindscape as well as social milieu, lays bare the dynamics that shape the fictional matrix of her novels. The present paper undertakes to study the trajectory of events involving the life of the major protagonist of Shashi Deshpande's novel *A Matter of Time* (1996) in the light of 'Monomyth' of journey theorized by Joseph Campbell in his much acclaimed theoretical book, *A Hero With A Thousand Faces*.

Keywords: Archetype, Myth, Monomyth, Patterns, Journey, Self-Realization.

Stories, like life lived by real people, follow patterns which are called archetypes. One of the archetypes common to almost everyone is conceiving life as a journey, something Joseph Campbell calls the archetype of "Monomyth." According to Abrams, Carl Jung applies "the term *archetype* to 'primordial images,' the 'psychic residue' of repeated types of experience in the life of our very ancient ancestors which, Jung said, are inherited in the 'collective unconscious' of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams and private fantasies, as well as in the work of literature." (M. H. Abrams 11). Joseph Campbell divides the archetype of journey into three major heads, i.e. Departure, Initiation and Return that are further divided into sub-

stages. The sub-stages do not necessarily follow the sequence in which they are delineated by Joseph Campbell. The central protagonist of Shashi Deshpande's novel *A Matter of Time* (1996) becomes a fit case study in this context because his life follows a trajectory of events that commensurate with different stages of monomythic archetype as propounded by Joseph Campbell. Being an orphan a little too early in life germinates in him a consciousness of being abandoned, something that makes him a wanderer who hitchhikes from one relational support to the other. He qualifies as a university professor of history and falls in love with Sumi at first sight after securing a rental accommodation at the latter's house. He proves to be a supporting husband and a loving father of his children but continues to be haunted by an essential question of life and death. He feels suffocated in the mundane family life and occasionally experiences the pull to free himself from the sense of imprisonment. In the course of this he publishes an article in the local newspaper wherein he attributes some accidentally discovered erotic poems to a saint poet of India.

The article invites a lot of criticism by the right-wing political leaders, so much so that Gopal is thrashed by the students of the university where he teaches. This assault on his body as well as his intellectual commitments augments the already simmering desire in his mind to break free from a social and familial set up to which he is an alien. He resigns from his job as a professor and walks out upon his wife Sumi and three daughters Aru, Charu and Seema, and begins to live in a single room on the top of a printing press owned by his student Shankar. It is in this room that his wife Sumi and his mother-in-law Kalyani, his sister-in-law Premi and his daughter Aru visit him one by one to persuade him back to the family. In an imagined answer to one of the questions by Aru, Gopal lays bare the deep-rooted fear and emptiness of his mind:

I was frightened, Aru, frightened of the emptiness within me, I was frightened of what I could do to us, to all of you, with that emptiness inside me. That is the real reason why I walked away from Sumi, from you and your sisters . . . 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. (*A Matter of Time*, 50-51)

Shashi Deshpande refers to another significant incident in Gopal's life by means of flashback which had provided him with a glimpse of abandonment as well as loneliness of every

human being. This happened on Sudha's death who is Gopal's sister from the same mother but different father. Gopal, while remembering Sudha's death, thinks loud:

Sudha who invested all of herself in relationships, if this crutch of family and ties failed her when she needed it most, what hope is there for any of us? 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. And so it's a lie, it means nothing, it's just deceiving ourselves when we say we are not alone. It is the desperation of a drowning person that makes us cling to other humans. 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)

It is this inner emptiness and a sense of living purposelessly that becomes, in Campbell's words "The Call to Adventure," the first stage of 'Departure' as discussed by Campbell:

Destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented . . . but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight. (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 48)

Leaving the 'pale of his society,' Gopal, lights out for the 'zone unknown' in search of authenticity and meaning of life. The room on top of Shanker's printing press metaphorically signifies a strange land which did not have any of the comforts of his own house and family. This dingy and sparsely furnished room becomes emblematic of the chaos as well as existential void that Gopal carries within himself, a space that is the externalized version of Gopal's inner mindscape.

The second significant sub stage in the Departure part of the journey of a hero as enunciated by Campbell is 'Refusal of a Call,' something which Gopal exhibits in dealing with the dilemma of either staying back with the family or walking out of it. The burden of emptiness and fear weighs so much upon Gopal that he accepts the call and abandons the family. This stage in the journey of a hero has been termed as 'The Crossing of the First Threshold.' Shashi Deshpande depicts this stage in a vague manner almost bordering upon a mystery. Having made

up his mind to walk out on his family without making any hue and cry Gopal gently enters Sumi's room while she is watching T.V leisurely:

Gopal comes in . . . Something unusual about him that has nothing to do with the fact that he has not changes into his pyjamas . . . She can't pinpoint anything specific, just this odd feeling that he seems- disjointed? Uncoordinated?.... I want to talk to you,' he says and abruptly begins. And she sits and listens in silence to what he has to say to her.

The T.V goes on through his talk, neither of them thinks of turning it off, or turning down the second either, so that his words come to her against the background of the song . . . The telling of what he has come to say takes him so little time that when he has done, the song is still going on. He looks at her for a reaction but she is gazing at him just as expectantly, waiting for him to go on. The realization that there is nothing more to be said—by either of them—comes to them almost simultaneously and he goes out as quietly as he had come in. (8-9)

The depiction of the departure as mysterious and listless seems intentional on the part of the author so as to accentuate the difference of existential planes on which both Gopal and Sumi operate.

The next sub stage in 'Departure' which Campbell calls 'The Belly of the Whale' is the place where Gopal takes temporary refuge apparently which is the house of his student. The author describes this place as follows:

This is an old part of the town, where tiny lanes criss-cross one another and homes, small shops and restaurants jostle together in a jumble of noisy existence. Gopal's room, above the printing press that belongs to his student, is an odd place for a man to 'retreat' to-the thought will occur to all those who visit him. But like the truck drivers, who, after a night of frenetic driving cabins, wholly insulated from the outside world, Gopal is unaware of the jangle of noises in which he is living his life. (40)

Campbell describes such a place as “a sphere of rebirth which is symbolized in the world-wide womb image of the belly of the whale” where the hero “is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died . . . but here, instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again” (77). The room above Shanker’s printing press becomes an incubation unit for Gopal where he hibernates and turns his gaze inward. Pearson in his work, *Awakening the Heroes Within*, views that on such a “journey, we leave the safety of the family or tribe and embark on a quest where we encounter death, suffering and love. But most important, our selves are transformed” (9). He enters into a ritualistic death and attempts to enter the womb and experience the prenatal stage of purity, innocence and pure immaculate consciousness. Whereas, everyone believes Gopal to be dead, “Sumi has no fears of his death; on the contrary, there is certainty of his being alive, of his steadily pursuing his own purposes” (24).

After passing through the stage of ‘Departure,’ Gopal enters the second part of journey termed as “Initiation” involving trials and tribulations which he negotiates, leading to ‘apotheosis’ of a journey ending with the phenomenon which can be understood as coming to terms with the self. The first stage of the process of initiation is called ‘The Road of Trials,’ something which includes Gopal’s confrontations with his wife, two daughters, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, a cousin Romesh and a lawyer hired by Aru. Out of encounters, the toughest one which Gopal tackles is that of Aru whose questions are compared with till then unanswered questions of Yaksha which he puts to Yudhishtra in the *Mahabharata*. Comparing his confrontation of Sumi with that of Aru, Gopal says:

Aru, in her anger, reminds me of Sumi. But Sumi’s anger is sharp: one clean cut and it’s over, Sumi is wiping the blade and putting it away. Aru, on the other hand, is hitting out with a blunt weapon, uncaring of where the blow falls, even hurting herself in the process. Her questions are like the Yaksha’s questions; a wrong answer will cost me my life. (50)

This stage involves “long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination. Dragons have now to be slain and surprising barrier passed again and again, and again” (Campbell 90). The underlying quandary which Gopal seeks answer for, throughout, is

with regard to the greatest wonder of human life. In an answer to Premi, his sister-in-law's question Gopal asks if she remembers what Yaksha asked Yudhishtra in the *Mahabharata*:

. . . what is the greatest wonder in this world? And what Yudhishtra'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 . . . I stopped believing. The miracle failed for me and there was nothing left. You've got to be the Buddha for that emptiness to be filled with compassion for the world. For me there was just emptiness . . . No, Premi, the meaning has to be found in your own life. (133-134)

The Yudhishtra's rejoinder to Yaksha's last questions in the epic *Mahabharata* becomes an 'inner guide' for Gopal, something that Pearson defines as "archetypes that have been with us since the dawn of time. We see them reflected in recurring images in arts, literature, myth and religion and we know they are archetypal because they are found everywhere, in all times and places" (5-6). The next significant stage in the journey of a hero marks encounter with a woman or women who symbolize life, something is out to overcome and seek the self. In this case Premi and Sumi symbolize 'Temptress' who aim at detracting Gopal from his journey of self-realization. Premi openly expresses her love for Gopal, probably finding him more vulnerable in the absence of Sumi: "Do you know what the truth is, Gopal? When I came home after my finals, I didn't know it myself, that I was to marry Anil, I mean . . . But, "she smiles, an awkward, strained smile, 'why am I speaking of all that now? . . . Gopal's silence makes her falter, and then she deliberately changes the subject" (132). Gopal's silence signifies a barrier and an armor against Premi's advances, something that makes the latter conscious about the impermeability of the former. Even Sumi, during one of her meetings with Gopal acts as a metaphoric 'temptress' but soon realizes the futility of the exercise. The author encapsulates the last encounter between husband and wife in the following words:

. . . Gopal comes out of his thoughts, becomes aware that the space between them in the room is filled with desire, his desire, that his body, after all these many months, is awake. Why now, why here? He is angry with himself, his very struggle against it makes it difficult for him to subdue his body. He gives up and begins listening to Sumi and slowly desire ebbs away from him. There has been

something terminal about it, the last flare before the flame dies out. And it leaves him, when it is over, grey and spent . . . They stare at each other in silence for a moment. Gopal is the first to begin laughing and she joins in. It is on this note of laughter that they part. They will not meet again (223-224).

Though initially Gopal feels a strong urge to make love to Sumi in Shanker's house but somehow reins his physical desire and avoids falling for woman's body. He realizes that it was "this losing yourself in another human being, that men give up their dreams of freedom" (223). Gopal, by now, has realized the physical and material pursuits as futile and wasteful and seems to have got the glimpse of the inner world that he sought. The laughter towards the end marks the mutual respect for each other and signifies that Sumi understands the conviction of purpose. It also marks the culmination of the stage of a couple's life as husband and wife. This stage in the journey of a hero is called "Woman as the Temptress" which Campbell defines as follows: "But when it suddenly dawns on us, or is forced to our attention, that everything we think or do is necessarily tainted with the odor of the flesh, then, not uncommonly, there is experienced a moment of revulsion: life, the acts of life, the organs of life, woman in particular as the great symbol of life, become intolerable to the pure, the pure, pure soul" (102).

Another significant phase in Gopal's journey which Campbell terms as "Atonement with the Father" also plays an important role in his life as a seeker. Gopal has always been haunted by the fact of his father having married his dead brother's wife. This has remained a moral question which portrayed his father as a villain who succumbed to "his passion for his brother's wife" (43) as if he had been desiring his elder brother's death. Gopal always carried the image of his father as "a man who sinned against his brother by loving his wife. The brother dying of grief and the wife and the man marrying immediately after (42). The continuous negotiation with the haunting image of his father kept Gopal "steeped in a sense of sin, sealing the potentially adult spirit from a better balanced, more realistic view of father and therewith of the world" (107). Gopal's ego has developed largely against his father who was his mother's guilty partner and has continued to imprison him inescapably in its bounds. As per Joseph Campbell, "atonement consists in no more than the abandonment of self-generated monster . . . but this requires an abandonment of the attachment to the ego itself" (110). Finally, when Gopal comes to terms with this image after appropriating him, he attains a kind of rapprochement with his father. Now he dreams his father as a "kindly man, as if we have, through the years, achieve a kind of peace

in our relationship, as if, like any son with a living father, we have finally, after a long struggle, achieve harmonious relationship” (43). This stage in the journey of Gopal corresponds to what Joseph Campbell describes in these words: “for the son who has grown really to know the father, the agonies of the ordeal are readily borne; the world is no longer a vale of tears but a bliss-yielding, perpetual manifestation of the Presence” (126). The author is aware of the fact that ‘Presence’ is the key to self-realization, a phase in spiritual journey that signifies disentanglement from the agonies of the past as well as the apprehensions about the unknown future.

“Apotheosis” is the next sub-stage, as per Campbell, of the second stage of hero’s journey known as “Initiation.” This stage is described as “the divine state to which the human hero attains who has gone beyond the terrors of ignorance” (128), thereby making him fearless and beyond the ambit of change. At this stage, “pain and pleasure don’t enclose him, he encloses them--and with profound repose” (129). After the cremation of Sumi, Gopal reaches this stage of ‘apotheosis,’ a state which is beyond the sphere of logic and mind, something which dazzles Gopal into a realm of equanimity and repose. The author depicts Gopal’s experience of apotheosis thus:

And now when he ceases to think, suddenly there comes to him a moment as when the body is fighting fever, all sensations heightened, sharpened to a fine point of acuity. He has a feeling of stepping out of his body, out of his plane of existence, of seeing time, past, present and future existing simultaneously within him. It is like seeing a pageant, a pageant that both frightens and dazzles him, a pageant, the meaning of which eludes him. (238)

The author’s statement, ‘the meaning of which eludes him’ throws ample light on her knowledge that the experience of pure selfhood or soul lies beyond the sphere of logic, understanding and meaning. This stage of ‘apotheosis’ can also be understood as the penultimate stage of the hero’s journey, i.e. “The Ultimate Boon” where “the mind breaks the bounding sphere of the cosmos to the realization transcending all experiences of form--all symbolizations, all divinities: a realization of the ineluctable void” (Campbell 163). With this, Gopal enters into the last stage of his journey i.e. return. he crosses the return threshold without any resistance when he and Charu,

“walk back together to the room where the others are waiting for him so that they can return home” (239).

This completes the cyclic journey of Gopal, i.e., from Sumi’s house where he walked out upon her to the Shanker’s room and back home. His return makes him “Master of the two Worlds” (Campbell 167) where he strikes a balance between his spiritual self and a social being. In the end Gopal’s decision to undertake another journey with the apparent purpose of the immersion of Sumi’s ashes in Alaknanda river symbolize the last stage of Campbell’s journey of a hero called as “Freedom to live.” The silent farewell which Gopal’s daughter and his mother-in-law give him signifies that his daughters have outgrown the need of his presence as well as their realization that Gopal be set free.

Shashi Deshpande, being an adroit experimenter of narrative techniques, has narrated the story by making use of flashback method but the linearity of the storyline culled from the novel delineates a vivid trajectory of Gopal’s external and internal journey. The author has invested more efforts on revealing the inner mindscape of the protagonist, thereby making him a spiritual seeker, not an external wanderer searching for hidden treasure or magical potion. There is a stark rendition of the movement of Gopal from periphery to core and then back to periphery where equanimity, balance and poise become emblematic of the culmination of his search.

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