



*Journal of Advances and  
Scholarly Researches in  
Allied Education*

*Vol. VI, Issue No. XI, July-  
2013, ISSN 2230-7540*

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### A STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S A MATTER OF TIME

AN  
INTERNATIONALLY  
INDEXED PEER  
REVIEWED &  
REFEREED JOURNAL

# A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Deshpande's novel *A Matter of Time* clearly shows, her concerns to concentrate on larger issues pertaining to human life and what is remarkable is that the novelist herself is not aware of it. She told her interviewer M.D. Riti: "I have now reached a point.... at which I feel there must be change in my writing. I do not know what kind of change this will be. One gets stale after a while" (28). The novel deals with the human predicament of three women representing three generations of the same family. For the first time Deshpande makes a man the protagonist of her novel, but this hasn't led her to focus entirely on the man. As usual she has given expression to woman's pain, suffering and endurance in marriage. The novel veers round an urban, middle-class family of Gopal and Sumi with their three daughters - Aru, Charu and Seema. It begins with Gopal entering the house and telling Sumi that he is leaving the house for good. Sumi is unable to react verbally and the next morning she tells about it to her daughters, repeating Gopal's words. She is so shocked with Gopal's action that she lapses into complete silence, trying simultaneously to keep things normal for her daughters. But they feel restless as "Sumi, despite her facade of normality, has a quality about her—a kind of blankness—that makes them uneasy" (Deshpande 10-11). The crisis not only leads to an intense introspection by the women protagonists in the first person narrative but also by the male protagonist Gopal. Although the debate on her identity as a feminist writer still rages, she shows that she has the knack to sympathetically delve deep into male protagonists' psyche. After Gopal's desertion, Shripati, Sumi's father brings them to 'Big House' - their parental home. For Sumi's mother, Kalyani, it's not only a great tragedy, but also a matter of shame and disgrace. She gives a poignant cry: "No, no, my God, not again." She begins to cry, sounding so much like an animal" (Deshpande 12). For Sumi, her grief, anger and humiliation are so deep that although she remains calm and composed outwardly but deep within she is very restless. She becomes an enigma for her parents, sister and cousins. They fail to deal with her apparent stoicism. She confesses that Gopal's walking out has left such a void that she cannot find her bearings and there are no markers to show her which way she should go. The incident had made a telling effect on her body and soul: With Gopal's going, it was as if the swift-flowing stream of her being had grown thick and viscous—her movement, her thoughts, her very pulse and heartbeats seemed to

have slowed down, (Deshpande 28) Her daughters feel hurt by her apparent stoicism, as they want to share their mother's loss and sorrow. Gopal's walking out of the family comes as a shock to the readers as well, i.e., why did he marry Sumi in the first place. Theirs is not an arranged one but a love marriage. Gopal asks himself: "Why did I marry Sumi? Because I met her—it's as simple as that" (Deshpande 65-66). Thus, the marriage is devoid of any initial romance, but is the inevitable outcome of a matter-of-fact relationship. As Beauvoir asserts: "The husband is often chilled by the idea that he is doing a duty, and the wife is ashamed to find herself given to someone who is exercising a right over her" (463). The contract was easy and its breach was even easier. But their marriage cannot be said to be incompatible as their first physical consummation is fulfilling and gratifying to both. Gopal recounts the union later: "And I knew then that it was for this, this losing yourself in another human being that men give up their dreams of freedom" (Deshpande 223). Deshpande does not assign any tenable reason for Gopal's desertion and the readers remain in the dark as to his motive behind his apparently seeming mindless act. Though the novel refers to the *Natyasastra* as it has epigraphs for its sections, passages from the *Upnishads*, Gopal's decision to leave the family does not seem to imply the Vedic renunciation or *Sanyas'*. His abandonment of the family is not the result of satiation from the worldly life. His is the case of withdrawal in pain than a renunciation due to contentment. Moreover, his life has nothing to offer in lines corresponding to the other Vedic stages of a man's life. Gopal gives up his family without fulfilling his obligations toward his wife and daughters" In the absence of any obvious reasons, Kalyani, Sumi's mother, decides to plead with Gopal to return home. Gopal assures her that Sumi is not at all responsible for his decision, but does not offer any other reason for the act.

But Sumi feels hurt when her daughters blame her for Gopal's act of desertion: "Do my daughters blame me for what Gopal has done? Do they think it is my fault? Why can't I open my heart to them?" (Deshpande 23). Sumi, in fact, is trying to come to terms with the hard, painful reality, and expects her daughters also to do the same. Her daughters are also anxious if their father is dead or alive, but Sumi is sure about his being alive and pursuing his own goal. Sumi's

sister, Premi, tries to make out a tenable reason from Gopal, which proves futile. Later Premi comes to know from Aru and Charu that his students at the college had humiliated their father, which could have been the plausible reason for his resignation from the job. But it seems to be so facile an answer that the same is unacceptable to the readers. Deshpande gives no concrete reasons for the act, which suggests that, perhaps, Gopal himself is not sure about the reasons behind his decisive act. One plausible reason for Gopal's decision is his sense of alienation and loneliness born of his abnormal childhood. Gopal is unable to come to terms with the fact that he was born of the union of his father and his father's brother's wife. A conflict rages in his adolescent mind for the reasons that led to this marriage. Later in life, he happens to read Hamlet and draws a parallel between his own and Hamlet's predicament: It was when I read Hamlet, fortunately much later, that the most terrible version of my parents' story entered my mind [ ]. In this story my father became a man succumbing to his passion for his brother's wife, the woman compliant, a pregnancy and a child to come and then after the husband's convenient death (no, I couldn't I just couldn't make my father poison his brother) a marriage of convenience. (Deshpande 43) While his father was alive, he was unable to relate himself to his father as he considered him as his mother's guilty-partner. Later, their deaths leave a sense of great void in his life. He gets completely shattered at the realization that his sister Sudha and he did not share the same father. And he later reflects, "that was a betrayal that cut away at the foundations of my life" (52). Thus, we see that Gopal has been nurturing a sense of alienation and loneliness since his childhood. He reflects: "All human ties are only a masquerade. Some day, some time, the pretence fails us and we have to face the truth" (52). It is perhaps this realization that has led to his walking out of his family. But Deshpande does not suggest any reason for his renunciation.

Although Gopal's desertion is the cause for great worry to Sumi's mother, sister and cousin, but this sudden crisis in her life brings out her great inner strength and strong character. She stoically accepts the humiliation and disgrace of a deserted wife. She raises no fuss over it and lapses into a stone-like silence. Her self-respecting nature makes her refuse all monetary help from close relatives. Sumi's state of mind, at this point in the novel, is close to the state of traumatic neurosis in which a person assimilates. She takes up a temporary teaching job to fend for herself and her daughters. She is even against staying at the spacious 'The Big House', her parental home. Though later she moves into the Big House for her daughters' sake yet she doesn't rave and rant, sheds no tears and doesn't hanker after sympathy from the relatives. Sumi proves that she is made of different stuff as she harbours no grudge against Gopal by setting him completely free to pursue his own purposes by asking Aru not to sue her father for maintenance. She even decides against putting pressure on Gopal to return home for her or for her daughters. Deshpande does not blame either Sumi or Gopal for the abrupt disintegration of this family. In

the novel, she gives a realistic and detached, matter-of-fact depiction of the inner landscape of her male and female characters. Nowhere does she depict Gopal as a careless or carefree husband and father. He has been described as a loving husband and a caring father. He is not presented as one shrinking from responsibilities but he has not been idolized either. Whosoever may be responsible but Sumi is made to suffer for no fault of hers. Shankar's mother says: "Go back to your husband, he's a good man. If you've done wrong, he'll forgive you. And if he has - woman shouldn't have pride" (Deshpande 161). In a tradition-bound social set-up like ours, elderly women disapprove of such actions objectively without going into the subjectivity of such an incident. Kalyani-Shripati marriage also provides the same scenario as their marriage is in no way less poignant than that of Sumi and Gopal. Deshpande depicts her as an intelligent girl with a promising future, if only she had been allowed to pursue her studies. But the circumstances led her to be married to Shripati. Kalyani's mother, Manorama, had failed to beget a male heir to their property and feared that her husband would marry a second time. She is opposed to Kalyani marrying into a new family, as the property would then go to them. It is under such impervious circumstances that she gets Kalyani married to her brother Shripati just to keep the property within the family. Three children are born of this marriage—Sumi, Premi, and Madhav, a mentally retarded child. Kalyani's real tragedy begins when her four-year old son, Madhav, is lost at the railway station while she is to board the train to Bangalore. A son even though retarded, holds so great an importance in the Indian social setup that Shripati doesn't talk to Kalyani for the next thirty years. Soon after the incident, Shripati sends her back to her parents' home with their two daughters. Shripati returns home only after Manorama, her mother-in-law, urges him on her deathbed to return. Although he obliges and returns but not a word is exchanged between them. His return makes no difference to Kalyani's life or her existence as they live under the same roof as two separate individuals. Sumi reflects: "But for many others this may well be a sound arrangement where husband and wife are living together under the same roof even if there is only silence between them" (Deshpande 167). Here Deshpande lays bare the social compulsion and the vulnerability of such women in a male-dominated society. Even if nothing is left of married life between the husband and the wife, women suffer in silence just to keep their marriage going. As Sumi reflects of her mother, Kalyani: "But her kumkum is intact and she can move in the company of women with the pride of a wife" (167). *A Matter of Time* is rather unusual from Shashi Deshpande's other novels as here the entire focus of attention is not on the female protagonist, male characters are also allowed to grow on their own. Shri N.B. Masai studies the novel as a story where "the inner life of a woman emotionally isolated from her family is reflected and refracted in the embryonic women represented by her daughters" (144). R.S. Pathak sees the novel as a web of human relationships among three generations of the same

family. Deshpande also reveals the gross injustice meted out to women in matters of property ownership. Sumi is shocked to know that her maternal grandfather's property, which should have been inherited by Kalyani, is bequeathed to her father: "Why did they not give it to her? She finds herself looking into the conundrum of justice, a well so deep, dark and unfathomable, that she draws back" (Deshpande 196). Kalyani had every right to the ownership of the property, but the same is denied to her. Further, Aru is surprised to know that women find no mention in the family tree, although they went through thick and thin while discharging their respective duties to the family. Aru is again surprised when her lawyer-friend, Surekha, whom she meets to sue her father for maintenance, tells her: "Do you know that Manu doesn't mention any duty to maintain a daughter? The duty is towards a wife, parents and sons" (204).

Unlike the earlier novels, Deshpande gives voice to the man's point of view in the novel. Gopal's thoughts and feelings are laid bare before us. Motherhood has been given so prominent a place in literature and society that a father's feelings go unnoticed. Gopal's sense of alienation and loneliness since his father's unholy marriage remains so even after his marriage. Earlier also he felt himself like an outsider and even after marriage the feeling does not leave him: I saw it when Sumi put the baby to her breast. When I looked at them, that they belonged together as I never did. They were together in that magic circle. Woman and child. And I was outside. A man is always an outsider. (Deshpande 68) The mother-son bond is so deep-rooted in a man's psyche that it is nearly impossible to extricate oneself from it. When Shankar expresses his inability to protect his wife from his mother's sharp tongue saying, "She gave me birth, she brought me up, she looked after me," (216) Gopal reflects: "That's a debt we can never repay, it's a burden we can never lay down" (216). The novel attempts to depict the complex web of human relationships in an extended family over three generations. It reveals several aspects of relationships of all kinds - within marriage, with siblings, family relationships, generational slipovers, and relationships with one's self. The novel has several sub narratives woven into it, many of them move into the past - Kalyani's life; Gopal's childhood; Gopal's nephew Ramesh's relationships with him; Ramesh's parents and their relationships with Gopal; Manorama, Kalyani's mother with Vithal - and the whole range of social milieu behind the scenes. These sub narratives act as decentralizing factors. To present the world of mothers, daughters and wives is also to present indirectly the fathers, sons, husbands, and the relation between men and women, and between women themselves. Shri N.B. Masai points out: "Deshpande tries to exonerate the male by bringing in some strong, loving and responsible figures and the real balance is tilted by Gopal and Shripati" (147). But Shashi Deshpande ends the novel on a tragic note. The reunion of Gopal and Sumi is an unusual one.

When he returns she neither cries to him nor abuses him nor does she ask him for any explanations. Everything is normal as Sumi enters the room and finds him having lunch and reading poems. After lunch also she finds him in a happy mood, laughing and talking to the children. His presence does make difference to the others and her daughters, but for herself she realizes that they can "never be together again" (Deshpande 88). She reflects: All those days I have been thinking of him as if he has been suspended in space, in nothingness, since he left us. But he has gone on living, his life has moved on, it will go on without me. So has mine. Our lives have diverged, they now move separately. (85) Thus she has come to terms with her present with a new-born understanding to move ahead in life without any bitterness for the man who had been the cause of her humiliation and suffering. Now she is a new woman with a new understanding and consciousness, all set to begin her life anew and confidently as a teacher and creative writer. But this was not to be. Sumi and her father, Shripati, meet their tragic end in a road accident. This gives a philosophical dimension to the novel.

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