

**“THE ENCAGED SELF OF WOMAN” IN SHASHI DESHPANDE’S A
MATTER OF TIME**

Dr. Ritu Tomer Rathi

Assistant Professor
Government College, Kharkhara,
Dist. Rewari (Haryana)

Shashi Deshpande occupies a prominent position among Indian English novelists. She has treated Indian themes and has portrayed contemporary middle-class women with rare competence. In a wider sense, her subject matter is nothing less than human predicament. She portrayed the plights and problems, trials and tribulations of the middle class Indian women- especially those who are educated and have chosen a career for themselves. Her chief contribution consists in exploring the moral and psychic dilemmas and repercussions of their women characters along with their efforts to cope with the challenges to achieve a new harmony of relationship with themselves and their surroundings. She is a writer, as she admits in an interview:

My husband was a commonwealth scholar we went to England. We were there for a year. I thought it would be a pity if I forget all our experiences there. So he gave them to ‘Deccan Herald’...which published them promptly. So it began very accidentally... There was no thinking or worrying about the theme, technique or publisher. I simply wrote.¹

She began her career with short stories, which contain the germ of most of the strengths and limitations of her novels. The publication of her novel *That Long Silence* by Virago Press, London, has established Deshpande as a reputed novelist of considerable worth. She has been rewarded with many prestigious awards for her creative works. The novel, *A Matter of Time* presents a world of limitations and restriction in woman’s life and patriarchy is shown in full swing in three generations. Shashi Deshpande has depicted the recent socio-cultural changes and the awareness of woman as an individual in this novel.

A Matter of Time is an interesting novel of human bonds and bondages that depicts women across three generations, who discover strength and reality of each other. The novel lays bare the dual standards of society for man and woman. Deshpande has subtly brought to the forefront that women themselves contribute greatly to their subjugation. They willingly bow down to the tenants of patriarchy which in turn cut down their wings and they cannot fly afterwards like free birds in the sky.

In the novel three generations of women of the family come together and discover the strength and reality of the other.

Unjust values and conventions that grow in patriarchal society tend to undermine the individuality and importance of woman. Woman’s life in such a world is devoid of exposure and subsequent enlightenment. Deshpande in *A Matter of Time* depicts Kalyani 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 because Kalyani's mother Manorma failed to beget a male heir to their property and feared that her husband would marry a second time. She opposed to Kalyani marrying into a new family and that's why her studies were stopped in between. Three children are born of this marriage Sumi, Premi, and Madhav, a mentally retarded child. Gopal (Sumi's husband) who is quite much a man of modernist approach, replies to Surekha, a lawyer, "For the desire for sons, is the desire for wealth and the desire for the worlds. No, no, not yet my words, it's from the Upanishad" (AMT 214). This alone is not the truth, girls are reminded again and again that, "Daughter don't belong. All three of you birds will fly away to your own nests"(AMT 198).

The novel begins with a crisis leading to an intense introspection by the protagonist. It gives us an honest account of the abrupt disintegration of Gopal's happy family and the diverse reactions of all the people concerned. Gopal started his life with high idealism. Later he cuts himself off from worldly pleasures and reduces his needs to bare minimum. He walks out on his family but according to Indian scriptures, one could renounce the world only when he had discharged all his responsibilities towards his family. But in total contrast to it Gopal is not least bothered about his duties and responsibilities. He himself knows that "Marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes – a lifetime of commitment - is not possible for all of us." (AMT 69) It is premature on the part of Gopal to leave off his family when his commitments to them are yet to be fulfilled.

The ideal state that must be in marriage is missing in their life. It's more a marriage of two bodies instead of two souls even after leaving his wife; he is still haunted by the desire for body. He remembered that he touched Sumi's "bare flesh" in the river and "could feel it respond" to his touch. It is for "this losing yourself, in another human being that men give up their dreams of freedom." Coming face to face with Sumi later, he feels that "the space between them in the room is filled with desire, his desire, (and knows) that his body. . . . is awake." (AMT 223) This is how marriage has been degenerated to a level of physicality. Gopal himself admits to have been frightened by his own inner emptiness:

Emptiness . . . 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 drawing person that makes us cling to other humans, all human ties are only a masquerade. (AMT 502)

This is how he justifies his desertion to himself. When Gopal and Sumi had decided to get married, it was agreed upon that if either of the two wanted to be free, he/she would be left to go. This made Gopal's desertion easier.

Sumi is a modern woman, who tries to relate herself to the world. After Gopal's walking away, her creativity gets revived. She writes a play entitled "The Gardener's Son," and rewrites the story of Surpanakha from an original point of view. This revision of the Surpanakha episode speaks of Sumi's eagerness to place man-woman relationship on sound, non-partisan footing and also of her modernity in thoughts. Sumi's determination to take the reins of her life into her hands is praise worthy and it depicts the transitional phase where women have found a new sense of liberation. The societies we live in have dual standards for men and women. A man walking on his family isn't seen as an oddity though it was not justified. But if had it been the other way round: a woman walking on her family, leaving behind a husband and three daughters would have been considered as a culprit.

Despite equal opportunities of education and economic independence, women remained a victim of domestic injustice within the family, and other legal rights outside. Despite the universally acknowledged fact that women perform on par with men physically and mentally, they have been denied the freedom to express their feelings, thoughts and anguish. The main root of patriarchy lies in the desire for a son. How deep-rooted is the desire for a son, is to be witnessed in Kalyani- Manorama (*A Matter Of Time*) relationship. For Manorama, Kalyani is a great disappointment as she gives birth to two baby-girls. She wins the favour of her mother when she gives birth to a baby-son though a mentally retarded one. But that too proves short-lived as she loses her only son in confusion at a railway station. Deshpande's quote from the Upanishad sums up the Indian psyche:

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. (AMT n.p.)

Life, both for man and woman, is a succession of several stages and if we observe closely we find that a child is only a child neither a boy nor a girl. Why then is it that the birth of a boy is always rejoiced and that of a girl is always regretted. Deshpande elaborates it in *A Matter Of Time* as:

“A son is born to me, dear friend, a son is born to me.”
It was Goda who sang the song at Nikhil's naming ceremony, a song full of joy, a woman sharing her joy in the birth of her son with her friends.
“Nine months I bore the pain and now my house is filled with light.”
Sumi saw it then, the adoration of the male child. It must have been this way in the stable in Bethlehem, in Nanda's house on the banks of the Yamuna in Gokul. The male child belongs. (AMT 70)

People believe this too that life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards. Women are never considered a part of the history, they are always outside it.

So strong are the roots of patriarchy in our society that Sumi was reminded by her father when he saw her with a boy, as, “Remember my dignity.” Baba doesn't approve Hirshi's company for Charu and says, “That fellow's rash. I don't like Charu going out on his motorcycle” (AMT 73). This is how women have to guide their ways, according to the image presented to them by their elders. Girls seem to have internalized their sufferings. However advanced a girl may be, she finds herself alone, desolate and humiliated at all junctures of life. In such patriarchal societies women's destinies are set by the essential males in their lives. Women are reduced to the state of “not to think, not to dream. Just to live.”²

Marriage is a benefit and a burden for both men & women; but there is no symmetry in the situations of the two sexes. Aru, Sumi's daughter has begun to see a victim in every woman, a betrayer in every man. This is how our new generation looks at the scenario going on, in which women though advanced is still on a state that is lower to that of man. There is very often a sense of frustration, of non-comprehension, of resistance in the daughter when she thinks of the mother.

Deshpande's novels are a scathing critique of our social institutions like marriage or family, the way they stifle the growth and free expression of the individual. These institutions put the individuals into the slots like wife, husband, brother, sister, daughter, son, etc. and obstruct the free communication between human beings. Women are so conditioned by myths and folklore that they start taking adjustment and compromise as the signs of their maturity. Woman's life in such a world is devoid of exposure and subsequent enlightenment. Deshpande

has resorted to several myths in her novels, where one woman quotes myths to other and thereby gives her stance a social sanctity. The moot point in this paper is that though woman is made passive by the surroundings and myths act as cages for her yet she is aware that her life is a succession of traps constructed not only by the essential males in her life but also by her own self. This world is made patriarchal not only by male's domination but also by female's subjugation. If they have not followed the constructs of males, it would have been a humanistic world which feminists demand for.

Works Cited

1. Shashi Deshpande quoted in R.S.Pathak, "The Making of the Novelist," The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande, ed. (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998) p.14.
2. Deshpande, Shashi. *A Matter Of Time*. 1980. rpt. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990.p.27
3. ----. *A Matter Of Time*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992.