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Assertion of Feminine Self: A Critique of Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande, a prolific writer, has invited wide critical attention from her readers. The theme of existentialism, feminism, marriage and sexuality in her writings tend to project her as a writer dealing, almost exclusively, with the question of woman. But when she depicts woman's life in its various facets, she places her in a broader social and historical context, suggesting a complex and subtle pattern of cause and effect in her fictional world. Most of Deshpande's women characters suffer due to patriarchal thinking of society. But she does not confine herself to a depiction of predicament of woman in a somber and pessimistic manner. Rather she also reveals woman's urge and potential to find meaning and harmony in life, both with her inner self and the world around. Women's resilience, their invisible power of will to face inimical forces collectively, is exemplified by Deshpande through the figures of Kalyani, Sumi and Aru in *A Matter of Time*. All of them display a remarkable capacity to withstand the devastating pressures of life in a spirit of firm resolution and human dignity.

Keywords: Assertion, Resolution, Human dignity, Woman's urge, Harmony

Recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990 for her novel, *That Long Silence*, Shashi Deshpande's success as a novelist can be gauged by the vast readership she enjoys, and the number of critical studies available on her works. A brief survey of criticism available on Deshpande's fiction shows that her critics have remained all along preoccupied with the question of woman in her fiction. The treatment of woman has been discussed with some shift of focus from one aspect or the other of her existence. The interest of critics in the treatment of woman and her problems is certainly understandable, because most of her novels have women as their protagonists.

Almost all the women characters of Deshpande are shown to be the victim of the patriarchal thinking of society. the roles they are expected to play are not in consonance with the freedom and individual identity they aspire for themselves. Consequently the feelings of alienation from their bodies their aspirations and ideals and sometimes even from the work routine they are trapped in appear to be a common feature of their life. What differentiates Shashi Deshpande from her contemporary writers is that though her novels present a world afflicted with hatred, fear, anger, loneliness and emptiness they are not shrouded in overwhelming and unrelieved gloom. Hers is not an art of death but of life. It takes an artist like Deshpande to affirm the value of life and the human potentials to emerge out of the darkness of despair, while describing the realities of disintegration, disappointments and loneliness. Though the glimmers of positive outlook can be witnessed here and there, in some of the minor figures also, it is the protagonist, who mainly through her thinking, decisions and actions affirms the

worth and validity of human existence. This is evident from the way Kalyani, Sumi and Aru respond to their predicament in the patriarchal society, resisting in their own different ways, onslaughts on their integrity and identity. In the face of shattering challenges, they try to gain control over their lives and put things in order on the strength of the confidence and courage they find within themselves and from their bonding with each other.

Kalyani, in spite of having an antagonistic mother and indifferent husband, bears no rancour against life. When Shripati ceases all communication with her, Kalyani does not react with a show of emotions. She resists him by building her own cocoon, having Goda (her sister), Sumi, Premi and their families around the house and by maintaining a stoic silence. “When silence becomes deliberate it acts as a barrier to the penetration of the soul by a perceiver; it works as an operation of power rather than powerlessness. As it withholds communication it produces a kind of awe and becomes a potent tool of resistance.”¹ Kalyani’s resistance is so hard that even the author remarks in one of her interviews that Kalyani appears to Aru not “as a victim but as a woman who comes out of all that victimization intact.”² Here, Deshpande emphasizes Kalyani’s individualistic, dogged resolve to resist her tortures and survive on her own terms. This dogged resolution to go on even in adverse circumstances keeps her zest for life intact. Like her mother and husband, she does not hanker after a son and never makes life a hell for others or for herself. Rather, she brings up her daughters and granddaughters fondly. Though she is rejected by her husband she never feels broken in spirits and never loses her faith in herself. That’s why, she feels happy and empowered when she finds that in Shripati’s will she is referred as Vithalrao and Manorama’s daughter and not as his wife. She does not feel the sting of having been robbed of her marital status: “On the contrary, it is as if the words have given her something more than the house, restored something she had lost; they seem in fact, to have strengthened her.”³ Her alienation from her husband fails to undermine her faith in the value and validity of human relationships. Her granddaughter, Aru, is surprised to see Kalyani’s keenness for getting a good match for her which shows her (Kalyani’s) interest and faith in marriage – an institution which is responsible for her own misfortunes. This belief in marriage makes her a class apart from other female protagonists because she is of the opinion that for individual suffering, the age-old arrangement for continuity of life i.e. marriage should not be blamed. Her understanding of life, her broadmindedness, her affection towards her children and her urge to move forwards, in spite of all the onslaughts of time, make one conclude that she is a survivor in the true sense.

Kalyani’s positive outlook and resilient spirit are not just a source of wonder for Aru but a reservoir of moral and psychological strength from which Sumi and Aru draw on, when confronted with crisis of similar nature. Shashi Deshpande uses the old strategy of bringing out the affirmative powers, latent in her protagonists, by placing them in the critical situations in their lives. Sumi finds her life falling apart when her husband suddenly walks out on her. If Saru and Indu take refuge in their parental homes and Jaya at her Dadar flat, Sumi also, accompanied by her daughters, comes to her parental house. But the similarities between Sumi and Deshpande’s earlier protagonists end here. If others submit themselves to introspection and rumination to regain confidence, Sumi straightaway decides to face the facts squarely. Rather than getting quagmired in search for causes of her betrayal by Gopal, she just wants to get on with her life. This is evidenced by the way she starts frantically her search for an independent house. Though her parents do not consider Sumi and her daughters a burden, she is unwilling to stay there. Later, however, she is persuaded to give up the idea considering the impracticalities

associated with moving out of the Big House, which is spacious enough to accommodate her family, into an expansive and congested apartment.

Sumi is distinguished from earlier protagonists by a greater independence of mind and self-respect, revealed in her refusal to accept any kind of economic assistance either from her parents or from Premi and Ramesh. That's why, she takes up a job of a teacher which releases the hidden fountains of creativity in her. She writes a play, "The Gardener's Son," for the school function which becomes a success. This success gives a new lease of life to Sumi's writing talent which makes her feel "so good" that now suddenly she wants "to do so many things" (231). Inspired by this success, she now desires to rewrite the story of Surpanakha in the Ramayana, from a different perspective: "Female sexuality. We're ashamed of owning it; we can't speak of it, not even to our own selves. But Surpanakha was not, she spoke of her desires, she flaunted them. And therefore, were the men, unused to such women, frightened? Did they feel threatened by her? I think so. Surpanakha, neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it – it is this Surpanakha I'm going to write about" (191). This decision to revise Surpanakha's episode from a woman's point of view is a clear indication of Sumi's modern progressive outlook. It also indicates her desire to place man-woman relationship on sound, non-partisan footing where they can feel the warmth of relationship and not its bondage. This moral and intellectual courage to re-interpret woman's sexuality, to indicate its power and importance for woman, is further evinced in her resolute action of supporting her daughters in every possible way.

As a mother Sumi stands for responsibility, love, care and concern. She is always anxious about her daughters' well-being and happiness. Her own suffering does not make her wallow in self-pity and neglect her motherly duty as was the case with Saru. Rather, to keep her daughters away from adverse effects of desertion she never reveals her pain openly to them. She is perfectly aware of her responsibility as a mother-cum-single parent to her daughters. When Aru and she meet with an accident, she becomes totally frenetic and cries for help despite the profuse bleeding from her own injuries. After taking her to the hospital she neither leaves her for a moment nor takes any rest. She is worried about her daughter who feels dejected with her father's desertion. She desires that her daughter's life should be easy and comfortable: "I want her to enjoy the good things in life, I want her to taste life, I want her to relish it and not spit it out because she finds it bitter" (220). Bitterness in her own married life does not affect her view about the necessity of marriage for Aru who wishes to remain unmarried. Though she has to bear the brunt of desertion, her faith in the institution remains intact. This, clearly, indicates her optimistic vision of life. She is never seen dejected and forlorn; rather, she demonstrates strength and maturity even in adversity. It is because of this maturity and understanding that she tries to redefine her relation with Gopal. She understands that Gopal's life from the very beginning has a different concept and a different identity: "...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). Thus, she recognizes the essential loneliness of all human beings and sets Gopal free. This acceptance cannot be termed as passivity, as ShashiDeshpande says, "Sumi's acceptance is not passive. She blocks out the unpleasantness. She has a good opinion of herself, she is more concerned with getting on with life. She does not want pity, she would do anything for pride. She distances even her husband."⁴

Unlike the earlier protagonists, Saru, Indu, Jaya and Urmi, she does not hanker after the reunion with her husband. Her pride prevents her to unlock her heart and lay bare her emotions to Gopal. She does not request him to come back to her: "The picture she presents to the world is one of

grace and courage, to be admired rather than pitied” (172). It is this courage which makes her realize that they “can never be together again,” and their “lives have diverged, they now move separately, two different streams” (83). In this realization she is different and has guts enough to go on her own. She has no desire to plead or reform Gopal, nor she is shown taking support of any other male figure. It is due to this boldness and spirit to move on that she decides to join the permanent job of a teacher away from home. But due to her untimely death, this could not happen. If she had not died prematurely, her affirmation would have been complete in physical, emotional, psychological and economic sense. The sudden death of Sumi makes the reviewers comment that the last section of the novel “seems to be least finished, with many loose threads hanging, almost like a first draft and certainly untouched by a publisher’s editor.”⁵ But the novelist says that Sumi’s death “just happened” and that “it was not deliberate.”³⁵ The incident of Sumi’s death makes it clear that Shashi Deshpande believes in portraying the life as it is, with all its uncertainties and realities, and does not make it look colourful through her own readymade solutions.

The vacuum created by Sumi’s death is shown to be filled by the novelist through the optimism displayed by Aru. Aru is the representative of the new generation in the novel which does not accept meekly the wrongs done to it; rather, believes in “that you speak out, state the truth, that you stand up and defend yourself, that you refuse to be misjudged” (143). This speaks loudly of the clarity of understanding, firmness of conviction and strength of will and resolution of the new generation which she represents. Aru is so imbued with confidence and courage that she refuses to be cowed down or daunted by any external pressure. Deshpande, through her example, dismantles the traditional definition of woman as a weak and dependent creature. That’s why, Aru voices her resistance more vociferously than others. Like her mother, she is not ready to leave Gopal to himself. Rather, she questions him and makes him feel responsible for their pain and suffering. She decides to sue him for maintenance even against her mother’s wishes with whom she empathizes greatly. She tries to fill the vacuum created by her father in her mother’s life by playing the role of a protective male. Aru decides to give direction and support to her younger sisters and takes care of Seema with the sensibility of a mother without any complaint. Aru’s conversion into a responsible elder of the family suggests that woman is not weak by nature. In the absence of male support, a woman can think in terms of masculine strength.

Besides showing signs of masculine strength, she is sensitive enough to understand and feel the pain of others. In the beginning she resents Kalyani’s oppressive love and the way she looked at her and her sisters. But when she comes to know Kalyani from close quarters, her “troubled relationship” with her grandmother turns into a “partnership.” It is because of this renewed relationship that when the news of Sumi’s and her grandfather Shripati’s death comes, she rushes to Kalyani and kneeling besides her huddled body says, “Amma, I’m here, I’m your daughter, Amma, I’m your son, and I’m here with you...” (233).

Aru proves true to her words and like a responsible son, she shoulders all the responsibilities at home after the death of her mother and grandfather. As against Devaki, who has been so proud of her competence, it is Aru who manages all the arrangements. Instead of wallowing in emotional mourning she holds “the weight of her grief in her two hands, not as if it is a burden, but to balance herself” (234). She not only bears the pain of her mother’s death stoically but also decides to remain by her grandmother’s side through thick and thin. Inheriting her mother’s pride, dignity, courage and confidence, Aru does not look towards her father for help rather she

assures him, “We’ll be quite all right, don’t worry about us” (246) and both Kalyani and Aru, standing on threshold, bid farewell to Gopal.

Works Cited and Notes:

¹Usha Bande, “Resistance and Reconciliation: Shashi Deshpande’s *A Matter of Time* and *Small Remedies*,” *Writing Difference: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande*, ed. Chanchla K. Naik (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2005), p. 198.

²Vimala Rama Rao, “In Conversation with Shashi Deshpande,” *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*, ed. R.S. Pathak, p. 257.

³Shashi Deshpande, *A Matter of Time* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996), p.254.

All subsequent references to the text of the novel are from the same edition, and page numbers in all such cases have been given within parentheses immediately after the quotations.

⁴Vimala Rama Rao, p. 256.

⁵Meenakshi Mukherji, “Sounds of Silence (Review of *A Matter of Time*),” *Indian Review of Books*, March-April 1997, p. 31.

⁶Vimala Rama Rao, p. 257.