

VAGARIES OF TIME: SASHI DESHPANDE'S A MATTER OF TIME

MARY KAMBAM

Abstract: Sashi Deshpande is one of the talented Indian writers to arrive on the literary scene in the 70s. In all her novels she excels in depicting a kaleidoscopic world of women-the struggle and concerns of women in the context of modern Indian society and their quest for freedom and identity. She is a writer with native color who never writes outlandish or alien themes to attract the west. Her novels are a reflection of the fragility of human relationships especially the ones that exists between husband and wife. In all these relationships the woman is the centre of her fictional world. All her women characters seek change but within the cultural norms. Her works have drawn critical attention because of her authentic representation of female characters out of day-to-day life which are familiar ones and not merely women characters created for men. The writer has critically examined the institution of marriage in its varied dimensions in the novel *A Matter of Time* with realistic portrayal of four generations of women searching for their identity.

Keywords: *empowerment, fragility, Indian society, Sashi deshpande.*

Introduction: Sashi Deshpande as a novelist has established a special place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women writers in English. In all her novels Deshpande explores the fragile human relationships, their anxieties and inner conflicts. But inspite of the challenges and hostilities they encounter, remain uncrushed. Most importantly, there is a shift towards self-knowledge through a painful process of introspection. Her main focus of attention in her novels is in presenting life as it is and not as how it should be. As a novelist she is not drawn to the women's cause merely because of their gender but because she is against certain repulsive social beliefs and practices. She has raised her voice against such customs and practices which lead to woman's marginalization. As a humanist she has focused her attention on the oppression and suppression of women and not because she considers herself as a hard-core feminist. As she has remarked in one of her responses: "I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world, which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior or inferior, we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simone de Beauvoir that 'the fact that we are human is much more important than our being man and woman'. I think that's my idea of feminism" (Pathak 254).

The novel *A Matter of Time* explores the complex relationships within an extended family spanning over four generations of women with different mindset. A critical study of the novel raises many issues relevant to marriage. It is explored in its different forms and complexities. Sashi Deshpande has also succeeded in creating the male character of Gopal which is dealt in full length with greater credibility. He plays an important role in the novel, without whom we cannot think of a well-developed novel.

Manorama, who represents the first generation was tormented by the fear that she experienced due to her lack of a son. She was haunted by the thought that her husband Vithalrao might marry again for want of a son inspite of the fact that Vithalrao was an educated man for whom the patriarchal values and ideals had little value. This fear affected her whole life and she could not establish a healthy relationship with her daughter Kalyani who is presented as weak and fragile creature in the novel. Kalyani is pressurized by her dreaded mother to marry Shripati, her maternal uncle to prevent the property from going away as the narrator states in the novel: "Perhaps, after this, Manorama felt secure. The property would remain in the family now. Her family" (129). Kalyani silently submits to the wishes of her mother and is trapped in a loveless life. It is a dig at the orthodox society where having a son is considered as the top priority. All this was responsible for the hopelessness of the relationship between Shripati and Kalyani right from the start.

The deprivation of a son continues through Kalyani and Shripati, the second generation pair. The deep desire for a son, is witnessed in Kalyani-Manorama relationship. For Manorama, "She became the visible symbol of their failure to have a son" (151). Manorama is greatly disillusioned when Kalyani gives birth to two baby girls. She wins the favour of her mother when she gives birth to a son though a mentally retarded one. Kalyani's marital life comes to an abrupt end, with the loss of her four year old mentally retarded son at the Bombay railway station. Shripati goes madly in search of his son in the streets of Bombay but without success. Shripati stopped speaking to his wife: he "has not spoken to her since the day it happened"-about thirty five years ago (140). They live like strangers under the same roof. There is only silence between them. Through the portrayal of Kalyani, Deshpande has shown the vulnerability of

such women in a male dominated society. Even if there is no harmony in marital life, women suffer in silence to keep their marriage going because it gives security and a sense of dignity to them in society. Marriage is considered as the most important happening in a woman's life. 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).

Kalyani's character is created with superb authenticity and represents an unusual relationship found only in Indian society. She is a true reflection of self-sacrificing Indian women whom one finds frequently in the Indian society. The frightening silence between Shripati and Kalyani throws light on various issues regarding the significance of marriage in a woman's life where marriage is considered as the be-all and end-all of their existence. Sumi her daughter questions this kind of existence: "Is it enough to have a husband, and never mind the fact that he has not looked at your face for years, never mind the fact that he has not spoken to you for decades? Does this wifehood make up for everything, for the deprivation of a man's love..." (167).

The same story is repeated in the life of her daughter Sumi. Kalyani, who is a woman with archaic notions, is very upset when she comes to know about Gopal's desertion of Sumi. She is reminded of her own tragedy. Kalyani suffered isolation from her husband in stoic silence. But she would never like the tragedy of her life to resurface in her daughter's life. She says, "No,...no, my God not again".(12).She takes the entire responsibility of the unfortunate incident on herself apologizing for any negligence in Sumi's wifely duties though Sumi is at no fault. Unlike her other novels, in *A Matter of Time* there is no obvious reason which has influenced Gopal to give up his family life. There are different kinds of notions and guesses for this kind of behaviour. That is a mystery known only to Gopal-perhaps not even to himself.

Sumi who represents the third generation woman is made of different stuff from her predecessors. She reacts to this crisis of Gopal walking away on her with passive resistance, a very unusual thing to happen in the Indian society. Sumi is different from the other protagonists of Sashi Deshpande's novels. She is an epitome of silent suffering but does not sit brooding. No doubt, Sumi is hurt but she is more concerned with moving on in life, a very rare quality found in traditional Indian women. Her fortitude and endurance makes her an enigma. She is so self-controlled that she doesn't even talk about Gopal's desertion. Her daughters are hurt when they see their mother's stoic silence. But Sumi doesn't complain. Only once she complains: "what do I say, Devi? That my husband has left me and I don't know why and maybe he doesn't really know, either? And that I'm

angry and humiliated and confused...? (107). She is not oblivious of the bliss of human relationships but accepts the harsh facts of life with quite magnanimity maintaining that Gopal is "going his way and I have to go mine" (161). In spite of the crisis in her life she never neglects her responsibility towards her daughters and is aware of her responsibility as a mother -cum-single parent to her daughters. A woman's happiness and identity is considered to be dependent on marriage. But Sumi becomes economically independent, finds a job, immerses herself in her creative writing and thus discovers herself. Her own identity is established here. She emerges out of the crisis as strong woman willing to compromise with life as it comes.

Marriage, which is considered to be the most desirable relationship in the Indian society, does not find a place in Aru's scheme of things. This is because of her second-hand experience of marriage like those of Kalyani and Shripati, Sumi and Gopal and others. She is quick to recognize the enormity of betrayal and cruelty in the man-woman relationship. She is angry, pained and disturbed, takes charge of the situation and stands as a tower of strength for her family-the symbol of future woman. The fourth generation characters like Aru expect more tolerance and trust in husband and wife relationships. Aru is amazed at her grandmother Kalyani's keen interest in finding a good match for her and her unusual interest in marriage, which was responsible for her own misery.

Faint references made by Gopal about his past life reveals that his father had married his brother's widow, and he was born out of that incestuous relationship. But, more than that, it is the realization that his sister Sudha, and he did not share the same father destroys his stability. Gopal has been nurturing these feelings of solitude and despair as is obvious from his musings: "All human ties are only a masquerade. Someday, some time, the pretence fails us and we have to face the truth" (52). Apart from a few random recollections of his childhood, Gopal does not give any concrete reason for leaving his wife and three daughters abruptly. His relatives try in vain to find out why he deserted his family so irresponsibly. His description of loving husband and caring father evokes reader's sympathy for him.

The drawbacks in Indian tradition is brought out through the portrayal of Gopal. A society allows a man to relinquish his responsibility of a householder in the name of religion or for any other motive. But it is not the same with the woman. "Episodes from history and mythology bear witness to men who were venerated for their selflessness while no thought was given to the silent suffering and sacrifice of their wives." Sashi Deshpande has portrayed women of different ages and has reflected their psyche likewise. The crisis that Deshpande's women confront are

culture specific and peculiar to the socio-psychological setting and social realities of Indian women.

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Mary Kambam CH.S.D. St.Theresa's College For Woman/ Eluru/Department Of English/Eluru/
yeddula.a@rediffmail.com