

**Journey From Silent-Suffering To Self-Assertion:  
A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter Of Time***

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**Abstract**

Shashi Deshpande occupies a unique position among the contemporary Indian women novelists in English. She deals with the struggles and adjustments of the middle class Indian woman who represents most Indian women. Her novels are about women especially in the context of marriage. Shashi Deshpande's chief thematic concern is with a woman's struggle in the contemporary Indian society, her efforts to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother, and most of all as a human being. Women characters play an important role in all her novels. Her protagonists find themselves enmeshed in desire and despair, love and hate, withdrawal, and alienation, suppression, and oppression and above all discord and male chauvinism. In the novel *A Matter of Time*, the major characters are Kalyani, Sumi and Aru. The novel's main focus is on the women of the three generations of the same family who are the victims of male chauvinism. In this novel, Shashi Deshpande gives a detailed description of the male chauvinism prevalent in the society. The women characters Kalyani and her daughter Sumi suffer a lot because of the desertion of their husbands. The story focuses on how Sumi developed as a successful woman by shouldering the responsibility of the family after her husband Gopal deserts her and her three teen-age daughters. The novel is split into three parts 'The House', 'The Family' and 'The River'. The three parts of the novel trace particularly Sumi's emergence as a successful mother of three daughters, her identity as a woman, and as a creative writer. Shashi Deshpande has brilliantly spun the novel by intermingling the third person narrative and the flash back technique as a tool of her narration. The technique helps her successfully in depicting her protagonist's journey from silent-suffering to self-assertion.

**Introduction**

In the fourth United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing, Mrs. Hilary Clinton, External Affairs Minister of USA, stated, "For too long the history of women, has been a history of silence. However, it is now no longer acceptable for the world to discuss women's rights as separate from human rights" (Jandial 49). Violence against women whether physical, mental, or emotional, is an issue that crosses all borders and all classes of women. Right from the ancient days, India is a patriarchal society. Indian woman has been a silent sufferer for years. She has been covered with thick layers of prejudice, convention, ignorance, and reticence in her life. She is considered as an inanimate object, she is expected

to be gentle, patience, gracious and forgiving.

Gender based inequality has been there in our country for many ages. Unfortunately, gender discrimination has assumed a systematic form in our patriarchal society. The words, we generally associate with the concept of an ideal woman are self-denial, sacrifice, patience, devotion, and silent-suffering. A woman is expected to depend upon someone- father, husband, son- throughout her life. With the influence of western education and culture, the Indian woman has re-emerged as new being.

It has been noticed that women writers mostly focus on women characters, their lives and experiences in their writing. A great deal of feminist literature has condemned the patriarchal ideology. It examines the ways in which the subordination of women is naturalised. All feminists are indignant at the sufferings inflicted upon them.

### **Shashi Deshpande and Her Protagonists**

Shashi Deshpande is one among the famous contemporary Indian novelists in English. She deals with the inner world of the middle-class Indian women. Her women protagonists who belong to the urban middle-class are seen caught in a struggle to free them from the hegemony of patriarchy. Her fiction explores the search of the women to fulfil herself as a human being, independent of her traditional role as a daughter, wife and mother. Shashi Deshpande's novels develop in the same manner as her female protagonists do in her novels. All her female protagonists- Indu (*Roots and Shadows*), Saru (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*), Jaya (*That Long Silence*), Urmila (*The Binding Vine*) are shown to be in a state of confusion at the beginning. As the story unfolds, they go through the process of self-introspection, self-analysis and self-realization. At the end, they emerge as more confident, more in control of themselves, and significantly more helpful towards a bright and positive future. In her novel *A Matter of Time*, she deals with the complicated relationship within an extended family which has four generations of women. Y.S. Sunitha Reddy aptly describes Shashi Deshpande regarding her novel *A Matter of Time* in the following words,

Shashi Deshpande, who has earned a niche for herself in articulating the bitterness and dissolution of her woman characters in her novels, enters for the first time into a broader arena and grapples with the complex theme of alienation in her novel, *A Matter of Time*. (qtd. in Sushil 72)

### ***A Matter of Time* Characters**

The characters that Shashi Deshpande portrays in the novel are rebellious. They rebel not with each other but with themselves, which is called involution, a revolution within oneself. It is because of this involution they recognize themselves and create an identity of their own. Each woman character in her own way rebels within herself. The anger or frustration that a character has towards the other character is taken within them. Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* portrays a woman who is more mature and dignified than her

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predecessors. She is little detached but manages herself admirably and almost becomes self-dependent.

The theme of the novel is the quest for female identity. Many men and women live together, but the complexities of man-woman relationships especially in the context of marriage, the trauma of a disturbed adolescence, the attempt to break traditional moulds in which women are trapped, gender discrimination, are some of the concerns of the novel, which give it a feminist bent of thought. The novelist, presenting women's point of view highlights the clash of tradition and modernity, quite often seen in the generation gap and conflict between women. Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values. They try to transcend the restrictive role. They rebel, reject and seek freedom from the traditional norms and way of life.

*A Matter of Time* is set in Karnataka in 1990s. It revolves around an obscure pattern of relationships within a family which has four generations of women. Manorama, Kalyani, Sumitha and Aru belong to four generations of the same family with different kinds of exposure and experience in life. Shashi Deshpande portrays the broken marriage of Sumi and Gopal as the centre of the novel. Their marriage life is compared with other marriages of Manorama and Vithalrao and Kalyani and Shripati.

### ***A Matter of Time***

The novel opens with a crisis which shatters the harmony of Sumi, the protagonist and her family. Her husband Gopal, a history lecturer in a local college, deserts her and her daughters. He abruptly declares that he cannot bear his married life anymore. The scene of Gopal's desertion is described by Keerthi Ramachandra in these words:

One evening, while Sumi is watching a film of T.V. about circus, "without the dire, the smells, the fear and despair of the real thing, but sanitized bacteria free" (8) Gopal tells her he wants to talk to her. And without any preamble says what he has to. He waits for Sumi's reaction, but within moments both realize that there's nothing more to be said he leaves as quietly as her had entered. (qtd. in Sree 108)

After twenty three years of his married life with Sumi, one evening in a very casual manner, Gopal walks out of and unburdens his responsibilities as a husband and as a father of three grown up daughters. He leaves Sumi for the reasons even he cannot articulate. Gopal feels that the life he has been leading with Sumi is meaningless. He feels, "I stopped believing in the life I was leading, suddenly it seemed unreal to me and I knew I could not go on (41). But he cannot say this to his wife.

Gopal is thankful to Sumi because she does not question him for his unkind act. The fear of being unable to fulfil his responsibilities as a father and as a husband might have

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forced him to take up such a decision. After Gopal's desertion, Sumi with her three daughters Aru, Charu and Seema returns to her parental house. The house named "Vishwas" is owned by Kalyani, the mother of Sumi. In "Viswas" Sumi's parents Kalyani and Shripati live in a strange relationship. Shripati has not talked to his wife for the past thirty five years. He considers Kalyani responsible for having missed their four year old mentally challenged son and so he deserts her.

Gopal, Sumi, Kalyani and Shripati are fighting for their life with each other. Their fight is not rebellious, but they fight within themselves. It makes them realize their true self. All of them are not ready to fight with one another but ready to accept what life has offered them.

Gopal begins his life with high principles, but life has made him a failure in his profession. He feels that he has lost the respect of his students and so resigns his job. He is totally disappointed about his life and he does not want to show his anger and frustration towards his family and so decides to stay away from them. He cannot explain the reason for his desertion to anyone even to Sumi. He blames himself for his action.

Gopal is pained to realize that his life is filled with emptiness. He is enlightened by the fact that, "Marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes - a lifetime of commitment - is not possible for all of us" (69). It seemed that he has carried this idea even before his marriage. When Gopal and Sumi decided to get married, Sumi was eighteen and Gopal was twenty five. During that night when they decided to marry, Gopal told Sumi that, "Any time if either of us wanted to be free, the other would let go. We are not going to be tied together.... No handcuffs" (221). Without taking this seriously, Sumi as a young girl agrees to marry him.

Gopal's childhood has not been normal. When he was a young boy, he felt hurt by the fact that his father married his own brother's wife, and he was born of that union. His mind is caught up in a conflict and he compares his state to that of Hamlet,

It was when I read Hamlet, fortunately much later, that the most terrible version of my parent's story entered my mind. In this story, my father became a man succumbing to his passion for his brother's wife, the woman complaint, a pregnancy and a child to come and then, after the husband's convenient death. (43)

What makes Gopal even worse is his realization that he and his sister Sudha do not share the same father. Dr. Prasanna Sree has interpreted the reason for Gopal's desertion in her article "Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande": "Perhaps his insecure childhood and his lack of understanding of the true concept of happiness and ignorance of the true reality of joy could have prompted him to renounce his grihastashrama and go in pursuit of

the eternal bliss” (113). Gopal’s effort to explain the reason for his desertion fail to convince anyone. By his action, his daughter Aru becomes very upset, and she feels that it is “... not just a tragedy, it is both a shame and disgrace” (13).

After Gopal’s desertion, relatives of Sumi - Kalyani, Ramesh and Premi often visit him and try to convince him. He tells them that Sumi is not responsible for his action and she does not need to be blamed. Sumi’s relatives even arrange a party to make things better between him and Sumi. When he meets Sumi in the party hall after one year of their separation, he finds himself stuck up with his decision. He wants to live with his family but at the same time wants to be free from his responsibilities. Even in this meeting, Sumi does not question him. They both speak like well-wishers and not like husband and wife.

Kalyani fears about her daughter’s future. Sumi’s three daughters often talk about Kalyani’s marriage to Shripati and their great grandmother Manorama. Aru always wonders why her grandfather does not speak to her grandmother Kalyani. At first, Aru mistakes Kalyani as responsible for the anger of her grandfather Shripati. So, she does not speak to Kalyani much. But soon, Aru comes to know about the story of Kalyani who has been suffering a lot due to marital discord between her and her husband Shripati.

Manorama, Kalyani’s mother is a very stubborn woman. Born in a normal family she has been married to a rich man called Vithalrao. After her marriage she cuts all her parental relationships except her brother who was born after her marriage. She always longs to beget a baby boy but gives birth to a baby girl. She lives in a constant fear that her husband would marry again because she could not bear a baby boy. Her insecure feelings turn against her daughter.

Being born as a girl, Kalyani is being hated by her mother Manorama. Kalyani becomes an invisible symbol of her mother’s failure to have a son. Kalyani is intelligent in her studies, but her mother does not allow her to continue her higher studies. Manorama does not want the family property to go away from her and so she compels her brother Shripati to marry Kalyani. Both Kalyani and Shripati bear the burden of this decision and remain unhappy.

After marriage Kalyani suffers a lot when she loses her four year old mentally challenged son in a railway station. Shripati searches for his son throughout the city like a “mad man” (140). He blames Kalyani for the loose of the son and from then onwards he stops talking to Kalyani. He does not even consider as a human being. When Manorama is about to die, she asks his brother to come to the Big House “Vishwas” and requests him to stay there. Thus, Kalyani undergoes a great mental pressure. Yet she does her role as a wife. She prepares food for her husband even though he locks him in a room. Thus, Kalyani is described as, “the real miracle... Kalyani who has survived intact in spite of what Shripati did to her, Kalyani who survived Manorama’s myriad acts of cruelty” (151).

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Shripati isolates himself from his family. He chooses to live in upstairs and Kalyani is never allowed to enter it. He has never been a good father to Sumi and her sister Premi. Premi recalls this and tells her husband that, “My father never spoke to me until I was ten... the truth was my father who stayed in his room, who never came out, never spoke to me” (18).

Thus, Kalyani is illtreated by her husband throughout her life and feels that history has repeated itself once again in Sumi’s married life. Kalyani suffers silently. N.B. Masai’s description of Kalyani’s character is as follows: “Kalyani’s fear is based on patriarchal oppression that condemns women to the margins of silence. She is made to realize that while losing her son, a male heir, she had abandoned her motherhood as well as her right as a wife” (qtd. in Sushil 73).

Kalyani fears similar fate to Sumi and cries out which resembles the cry of “an animal in pain” (12). When Gopal walks out on Sumi, it appears to Kalyani like a re-enactment of her own life, but she gives emotional support to her daughter. Kalyani says to Aru: “My mother didn’t care for my children either. I’m luckier than my mother. She is the one unlucky who didn’t know how to enjoy her children and grandchildren” (226). She wants to talk to her daughter, but Sumi does not share anything with her. She even goes to console Gopal, but her efforts go vain.

Gopal’s desertion upsets everyone in the family especially Aru, the elder daughter of Sumi. She is very rebellious. She is ready to rebel against her father. She meets her father after his isolation. She wants to unravel his strange behaviour. She questions him, “Why did you get married? Why did you have children?” (62). Aru feels distressed of the tragedy of her mother and her grandmother. When she speaks about Gopal’s uncruel act and her desire to punish him to Sumi, she consoles her by saying that “Do you want to punish him, Aru? I don’t. I’m not interested. I just want to get on with my life. Let him go Aru, just let him go. This is not good for you” (61). N.B. Masai aptly remarks Sumi as,

Yet it is from the depth of her despair that she tries to transform her emptiness into meaning in order to relieve her identity. She does not remain a passive mother but an active agent. We cannot forget that Sumi, like her mother, is a suffering, oppressed and wronged woman. Yet she does not question the man, her oppressor. (qtd. in Sushil 77)

At the same time, Aru is shocked to see her mother’s indifference to Gopal. She reacts sharply and flings angry words at her mother, “That’s wonderful. You don’t care about his having gone, you don’t care where he is, you don’t care what people think about, but I care, yes, I do, I care about Pappa having left us” (56). She holds strong views on patriarchy and how women in general, get victimized as a result of the actions of men. She even asks Sumi to get divorce from Gopal. Sumi ignores her idea hence she goes to Surekha, a lawyer to seek

divorce. Unfortunately, the lawyer does not respond well to her and so she fails to execute her plan.

Luckily for Sumi, she has the full support and sympathy of her parents, sisters, and cousins. This support of her family members helps her a lot to withstand the shock, pain, humiliation, and the trauma of desertion. Sumi takes Gopal's desertion as a matter of fact and undergoes her own type of suffering. In a very straight manner, she makes her daughters to discard all the unwanted things, when they vacate their house and decide to live in the Big House permanently.

Sumi wants to move on with her life after Gopal has left her. After returning to her parental house, she tries to find another place to live. She feels that she should not be a burden to her parents. When she understands her mother's concern for her, she gives up that idea. Surprisingly, Gopal's desertion has brought out Sumi's real hidden strength. She looks for a permanent job. She learns to ride scooter which is her first step towards an independent existence. In the beginning Aru does not feel comfortable with Kalyani but after knowing her story she becomes extremely attached to her.

Sumi feels disturbed when Shankar's mother tells her, "Go back to your husband, he's a good man. If you've done wrong, he'll forgive you. And if he has- women shouldn't have any pride" (103). She also insists that a woman should always be with her husband. Sumi wonders the way, even today women are being measured by their marital status. She openly confesses that, "It is enough to have a husband, and never mind the fact that he has not liked at your face for years, never mind the fact that he has not spoken to you for decades? Does this wifhood make up for everything, for the deprivation of a man's love?" (167). Unlike Sumi, Kalyani accepts all kinds of oppression against her without showing her agony in her face.

Being an independent woman, Sumi refuses to accept any help from her parents. She gets a job as a schoolteacher on a temporary scale. Initially Aru does not like Sumi to go for a job, but she could not stop her from doing so. She wants to meet Gopal to inform him about her new job. He feels happy for her. Both now realize that they must move on with their lives separately.

Sumi writes a play called "*The Gardener Son*" for her school function. The play becomes a great success, and she rejoices, "It feels so good and now suddenly I want to do many things" (231). Inspired by this success, she decides to write the story of Surpanaka, who was humiliated by the brothers Rama and Lakshmana from a very different point of view. She considers Surpanaka to be a bold woman who could express her desire openly to a man. She feels,

Female sexuality. We're ashamed of owning it, we can't speak of it, not even

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to our own selves. But Surpanaka 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, Surpanaka, neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it- it is this Surpanaka I'm going to write about. (191)

This reveals Sumi's progressive outlook. It also shows her eagerness to place man-woman relationship on impartial footing.

Simultaneously Sumi is concerned and worried about her teenage daughters and tries to give them all affection, love and care. She boosts up her daughters to have an optimistic vision of life even under harsh circumstances.

At the age of forty, Sumi starts her life afresh. She gets an appointment as a schoolteacher in Devgiri and wants to move there with her young daughter Seema. On hearing this, Aru is shattered but Sumi consoles her by saying that "Be happy for me Aru. This is the first thing in my life I think I've got for myself... I've been so lazy all my life. And now suddenly I want to do so many things" (230). Being self-confident, Sumi takes control of her life and reaches a stage of self-sufficiency and self-fulfillment. S. Prasanna Sree states about Sumi in her article "Women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande",

Modern and liberal in outlook, Sumi defies the outdated social opinion and orthodox treatment of a woman subjected to desertion by her husband. She has the courage to rise above the consequential problems and difficulties, humiliations and frustrations. (118)

Sumi meets Gopal and informs him her new job. They talk of their life and Sumi tells him, "Our life was complete" (22). Sumi with her father Shripati, while going to a bank in her scooter, meet with an accident and both of them die instantly. When the news of the death of Sumi and Shripati come, Kalyani is dumb founded and she feels extremely disturbed. Aru rushes to her and tells her, "Amma, I'm here, I'm your daughter, I'm your son. I'm here with you" (233). Through education and determination, Sumi's daughters find their choice and establish their identities- Aru as a lawyer and Chare who is to become a doctor. Sumi has left her identity in her daughters.

In the male dominated patriarchal society, a woman gets respect only as long as she is a wife. But Sumi who has lost her position as wife gets the respect of the world through her success as a mother for having made her daughters, independent beings. After Shripati's death, a will is found out and it becomes clear that Shripati has left the house to "Kalyani, daughter of Vithalrao and Manorama" (245). Goda anxiously looks at Kalyani when the will is read out, but for Kalyani it is not an important one, "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

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fact, to have strengthened her” (245). Kalyani preserves her family despite her sufferings.

After the death of Sumi and Shripati, when Gopal comes to the “Big House” Kalyani realizes that he has to make peace within himself. She does not compel him to stay with them and let him go on his way. She tells Gopal, “It has been very hard on you” (245). Aru assures her father that they will be alright. “We’ll be quite alright, don’t worry about us” (246).

The novel ends on a positive note. Finally, Sumi’s positive attitude towards life, work, economic independence, and her self-identity help her daughters to go ahead in their lives with hope and optimism. Sumi has found her identity and found a significant way of life before she dies. It shows that the novel does not end in despair after the death of Simi but ends on a note of hope. The novelist closes her story not with Sumi’s death but with Aru and Kalyani who stand together with a “a smile of encouragement” (246) which they have for Gopal. The important truth, the novel conveys is that self-pity is not an answer for any problem in human life. The most important message of the novel comes through Gopal’s realization in the end:

If it is indeed true that we are bound to our destinies, that there is no point struggling against them, even then this remains- that we do not submit passively or cravenly, but with dignity and strength. Surely, this, to some extent, frees us from our bonds. (246)

The words have a specific significance in the context of the feminine discourse, which Shashi Deshpande tries to place in the wider context. It is only through a process of self-examination and self-searching, through courage and resilience, that one can change one’s situation from despair to hope. Shashi Deshpande flashes some light on the importance of women’s education and empowerment in this novel. The men do not play an active role though they are the cause of the sufferings of women characters.

### **To Conclude**

Shashi Deshpande’s novels expose the patriarchal tradition in the society and the place of women in it. She presents a deep sight into the female psyche. *A Matter of Time* is an exploration of self-identity of Kalyani, Sumi, and her daughters. The most striking example of silent suffering is Kalyani who spends nearly forty years in total silence with her husband Shripati. She is indeed pitiable, but she exhibits deep endurance and strength.

Shashi Deshpande is a writer who does not believe in giving easy solutions to the problems that life throws upon us but believes that one should always have hope in life. Her characters in *A Matter of Time* fight within themselves and find happiness and meaning in it. Gopal continues his journey in searching meaning for his life. Sumi becomes independent and develops a positive attitude towards life.

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Through the portrayal of these silent, brooding, suffering women, Shashi Deshpande calls for a change in the norms and values of society. In one of her interviews with Geeth Gangadharan, she remarked, “I think we need to have a world which we should recognize as a place for all of us as human beings. There is no superior or inferior. We are two halves of one species” (qtd. in Saluja vol3). She advocates for creating a bold world for women. She feels that it is just a matter of time that the world would change, and women would find a space for themselves in the society.

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