

Psychoanalytical Study of Women Characters as New Women in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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DOI: 10.36348/sijll.2022.v05i09.007

Received: 18.08.2022 | **Accepted:** 14.09.2022 | **Published:** 20.09.2022

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Abstract

The concept of 'New Woman', a feminist ideal, emerged in the late 19th Century is one of the most explored themes in men and women writing. The phrase "New Woman" has been defined differently in different contexts, by men and women writers. Men writers tend to depict 'new woman' as the one who goes against the traditional norms and ethics to fulfill her desires following western culture and never minds her family and values, on the other hand women writers present her as progressive and conscious of her rights to contribute greatly for general welfare, playing a supportive role in the society and family. This is the significant shift that women writers focus in their writings through their realistic representation of new womanhood traumatised by socio-cultural constructs. The impetus for this study is drawn from the centrality of psychological trauma and internal anguish faced by the three generations of women characters - Kalyani, Sumi and Aru - in Shashi Deshpande's novel, *A Matter of Time*, set in coterminous patriarchal Indian society. Facing the repression in the male dominated, tradition bound society, they resist the wrongs within the culturally determined space and gain their identity. The study concludes that the essence of 'New Womanhood' does not ascribe autonomy and individuation of woman through radicalism, rebellion or opposition of action; but expression of agency through self-actualization, as Deshpande's repressed characters show in *A Matter of Time*. The research methods applied in the study shall be textual and discourse analysis along with psychoanalytic feminism.

Keywords: New womanhood, repression, self-actualization, socio-cultural constructs.

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INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande, the Sahitya Academy winner and a recipient of Padma Shri is one of the most accomplished contemporary novelists in Indian English Literature. Her works reflect a realistic picture of middle-class women and their struggles. Her fifth novel, *A Matter of Time* [1], critiques patriarchy by presenting three generations of a family living under the same roof but as strangers, and in psychological vacuum. Kalyani is the first-generation representative, the grandmother in the novel. The story centres around the ancestry of Kalyani, and shows how Vithalrao and Manorama, Kalyani's parents, being not blessed with a son live in disharmony. It also recounts the anxious moments in Manorama's life as she failed to fulfil her husband's desire for a son. Her agony was that her husband Vithalrao might remarry to have a son who would rightfully inherit his property. Vithalrao brings up Shripati, the youngest brother of Manorama by

educating him to become a lawyer. In order to prevent the property going away from her family, Manorama gets her daughter, Kalyani married to Shripati. Kalyani was not allowed to complete her schooling and was coerced to accept her uncle as her husband. However, Kalyani's marital life comes to an end as Shripati deserts her when she accidentally lost their only son on the Bombay railway station. He blames his wife for the loss and shuts himself up against all communication because of frustration, anger and despair.

The tear-soaked tale of suffering and endurance of Kalyani's life gets repeated in her daughter, Sumi's life, when her husband, Gopal leaves everything behind, including a happy family in his quest for self. Thus two men, Shripati and Gopal, run away from life and evade their duties and responsibilities towards their families. Both Kalyani and Sumi suffer silently in gender abused relationship

and endure the family responsibilities. They redefine themselves as caring mothers, surviving on their own terms within their given social world. Sumi's eldest daughter, Aru (Arundathi) voices her resistance on father's desertion and visits Gopal several times on her own. Her father's walking away on his family is, according to her, is not just a tragedy, but both a shame and a disgrace. Deeply hurt by the disintegration of her family, Aru thinks of complaining against her father. She does not want to let him "get away scot-free". She is highly disturbed when she notices how the women in their families are not given due place in patriarchal society. She is very confused and troubled with many questions about her grandparents, parents and her future. She becomes a pillar of hope for her grandmother, Kalyani on her mother's death in an accident along with her grandfather, Shripati. The novel ends with Gopal's departure to Alaknanda in pursuit of his quest for self, as Aru and Kalyani bid him farewell.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

The research methods applied in the study shall be textual and discourse analysis along with psychoanalytic feminism. Psychoanalysis as a theory of the unconscious links sexuality and subjectivity ineluctably together. In doing so, it discloses the ways in which our sense of self, and our political loyalties and attachments, are influenced by unconscious drives and ordered by symbolic structures that are beyond the purview of individual agency. Psychoanalysis depicts social life as the world of men, developed on the basis of the father-son relation and its aggression, hostility and love, in which women are merely the triangulating objects of desire [2]. As a theory, psychoanalysis offers insights into the individual psyche and also into the distribution of political power and hierarchy. Reading of *A Matter of Time* through the lens of psychoanalytic feminism offers the reader a better understanding of deep structure of gender as a binary opposition and cultural representation of Indian patriarchal familial issues, which are very much inherent in the present Indian society.

Psychological trauma and internal anguish in the lives of Kalyani, Sumi and Aru

The story in *A Matter of Times* revolves round the problem faced by women in marital life when men are not ready to shoulder the responsibilities of the family in the male-dominated, tradition-bound Indian society. Deshpande shows the traumatic neurosis faced by Sumi as she has been tied down to the family responsibilities to fight a lone battle being displaced and disgraced. Being emotionally isolated Sumi expresses her anguish to her brother:

I've begun to think that what Gopal has really done is to take *sanyas*... I'm surprised... look what's happened – it's not he who's going around with the begging bowl, it's I who am doing that.... It's so stupid of me, Ramesh, I never imagined such a thing happening, I

never prepared myself for this. I gave up teaching when Seema was born.... [3].

Here we find Sumi describing herself as a beggar does not mean she is feeling helpless, but the society sympathises the situation and gets an advantage over a single woman, as we find in the novel, when Sumi goes on a house-hunting crusade, Nagaraj, an estate agent tries to exploit her. Sumi resists his plans and goes back to her parental home, "Big House" along with her daughters. Consequently, Deshpande presents the social world of many relationships in the extended family of Kalyani and her daughters and granddaughters. Further, the novel also reflects on the generation gap and conflict between the women, while exploring the factors responsible for disintegration of marriage, and the effects and aftermath of desertion of women by men. Addressing to the psychological trauma in the life of deserted women, left to suffer in isolation, Deshpande shows how the family relationships are filled with silence and indifference in modern societies.

Focusing on the endemic patriarchy in Indian society, Deshpande dares to shatter the myth of male dominated social system. *A Matter of Time* reflects on the omnipresence of patriarchy in the form of gender oppression in marriage, motherhood, injustice meted out to women in matters of property ownership, and lacuna in legal rights of a man prescribed by Manu towards daughters. Aru surprised and horrified to learn from Surekha, her lawyer that *Manusmriti* or *Manava-Dharmashashtra* or *Laws of Manu* (the founding text of Hindu Law) discourses on topics such as duties, rights, laws, conducts and virtues; but does not mention any duty of a father to maintain a daughter in cases of desertion or divorce, as girls belong to other family as they get marry [4]. When we read the psychological trauma or unspeakable void causing irreversible damage to the psyche of Kalyani, Sumi and Aru, we find the profound sufferings in them caused by collective social practices of patriarchal hegemony. Deshpande presents the psychological void in Sumi thus, "With Gopal's going, it was as if the swift-flowing stream of her being had grown thick and viscous – her movements, her thoughts, her very pulse and heartbeats seemed to have slowed down [5]".

Nonetheless, Deshpande shows Sumi evolves from utter desolation recognising her role as a responsible single mother, helps her children to get on with their lives as before. Through Sumi's character Deshpande stresses feminine freedom in choosing a life to live as an individual. A closer look at Sumi's refusal to react to Gopal, "shows not a passive acceptance of man's supremacy, but a contestation, a critique of tradition" as noted by Usha Bande [6]. The agonizing dilemma of assertive women placed in a society conditioned by tradition abounds in *A Matter of Time*. Sumi rejects her daughter, Aru's words, "I think you

should see a lawyer”, her response, “What? Get a divorce? I’m not interested” reveals Sumi’s resolve to find a solution to her life on her own, she says, “I just want to get on with my life [7]” as she has accepted Gopal’s wish, when he walked out on them without explaining the reason behind his decision. Being known for diaphanous portrayal of the endemic imbalance in a marriage, Deshpande gives us exceptional delineation of women’s struggles and their life in oppressive silence in *A Matter of Time*.

When we examine Kalyani’s life, we find it as an incarnation of silence, “a silence so dense and hard... words bounce back”; we also find her face has “the blank look of a retarded person [8]” she looks too impassive to show any emotions. Through her speechlessness, Deshpande shows how silence when becomes deliberate, can act as a barrier to the penetration of the self by a perceiver, thus works as an operation of power rather powerlessness. Kalyani, as a victim of patriarchy, lived her life in silence for the only reason that she was responsible for the loss of her only son (as her husband, Shripati believes). Kalyani survives the torture, not only as a wife, but as a daughter too, because her mother, Manorama was expecting a son, not a daughter to gift her husband, Vithalrao, when she delivered the baby, Kalyani. Moreover, Manorama hated Kalyani to such an extent that she made her to marry Shripati to retain the property within the family. Throughout her life, she is made to feel an inferior being, an unwanted child, an unnecessary burden on the family and thus she lived a suffocating life.

However, the third-generation character, Aru (Arundhati), the daughter of Sumi and the granddaughter of Kalyani, repositions her identity as an assertive and rebellious young lady in the novel. Though, she is just eighteen years old, she voices her resistance more vociferously than Sumi and Kalyani. She questions her mother, Sumi for her submissive stand against her father, Gopal. She wants to punish him by taking the case to the law, she opines “it’s not right, he must be made to realize what he’s done... [9]”. Sumi could not respond when she questions, “... How can you dismiss it so lightly? I don’t *understand you at all*” (emphasis added). Aru, a representative of ‘new-age new woman’ could not understand her mother’s and grandmother’s indifference towards their victimised pathetic life, and she raises her voice against lack of sanity in human relationships in patriarchal social conditions. Her reaction is “violent and sharp” to her mother’s stoic acceptance of the calamity. She says “that’s wonderful...- but I care, yes, I do, I care about papa having left us.... I don’t want to live like this, as if we’re sitting on a railway platform, I want my home back, I want my father back... [10]”. Out of frustration she declares “I’m never going to get married [11]” as she finds the system of marriage does not have validity as she is well aware of the miseries of her mother, Sumi.

Inner emptiness and futility of existence in the lives of Vithalrao, Shripati and Gopal

No doubt, *A Matter of Time* is a gynocentric novel, yet Deshpande has fairly explored the inner conflicts and turmoil in the life of Vithalrao, Shripati and Gopal showing the dynamics of patriarchal thinking. Vithalrao and Shripati’s lives were bogged down by their unfulfilled desire to bear a son, resulting in marital discord in their lives. Both these characters fail to realise that they are equally responsible as their wives are in their failure to become proud fathers to sons. The feeling of emptiness in their lives does not have valid cause, but it is the socio-cultural patriarchal norm signifying ‘son as the redeemer in man’s life’, enunciated in *Upanishad* and *Manusmriti*.

Deshpande shows Gopal as an idealist experiencing existential alienation that leads him to desert his family. As Gopal reveals, he has had painful memories of his father and his marriage with his brother’s wife. He struggles within himself and undergoes severe inner conflict, nurturing the feelings of loneliness and desolation. “Emptiness, I realized ... it’s a lie, it means nothing, it’s just deceiving ourselves when we say we are not alone [12]”. Gopal’s “insecure childhood, his lack of understanding on the true concept of happiness and ignorance of true quality of joy could have prompted Gopal to renounce his *grihastashrama*, and go in search of eternal bliss” as rightly opined by Prasanna Sree [13].

Deshpande shows through the characters of Vithalrao and Shripati that men in patriarchal society never realise that their genes are equally responsible in determining the sex of their children. These two characters are the testimony of gender-bias prevalent in Indian society since centuries. A married woman has a few or practically no choice left to her say or go against to what her husband wills or desires. Deshpande depicts Manorama and Kalyani as stereotypical submissive and subjugated wives in a patriarchal society playing pre-ordained roles.

Indian Feminism and New Womanhood

Feminism as an ideology emphasises understanding the social and psychic mechanism that construct and perpetuate gender inequality and tries to change this biased attitude of society. ‘New Woman’ as a feminist ideal emerged to describe, woman who is independent in thinking and capable of leading a life on her own. In Western context, this phrase refers to the independent quality of a woman seeking radical change. However, men writers visualise the ‘New Woman’ as “...the best woman, the flower of all the womanhood of past ages” as they believe “...the sufferings of the past have but strengthened her, maternity has deepened her, education is broadening her... must perfect herself if she would perfect the race, and leave her imprint upon immortality, through her offspring or her works [14]”. When we use the ideology defined by Althusser, the

complexity becomes obvious mean “a representation of the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence [15]”. The contradictions in theorizing and implications are glaring realities which are apparently found in women writings. As a writer, Deshpande, is deeply committed to reflect the position of womanhood in the emerging contemporary Indian society. She presents the institution of marriage not as an empowering and emancipating, but as a medium which propagates patriarchy and further shackles the women. In her writings, she exhorted the patriarchal ideologies and their oppressive tendencies towards feminist growth and expression, and her works envision the ways of counteracting patriarchal domination.

In *A Matter of Time*, Deshpande shows Indian feminism as culturally oriented and thus her women, Manorama, Kalyani and Sumi, explicitly never resist the patriarchal limitations and they bear psychological tortures silently being deserted by men in their life. Yet her women characters in this novel never show anti-male attitude (except Aru) and they adopt the ways to cope with the tragedies in their lives, “clinging to their past, yet living in the present [16]”. Deshpande’s remarks in “On the Writing of a Novel” aptly reveal the psychological dilemmas faced by women in *A Matter of Time*:

Marriage invariably takes you to the world of women, of trying to please, of the fear of not pleasing, of surrender, of self-abnegation. To love another and to retain yourself intact – is that possible? To assert yourself and not be aggressive, to escape domination and not to dominate? [17].

Sumi as a new woman, recognises the essential loneliness in the life of all human beings and lets Gopal go deserting the family. Commenting on Sumi’s character, Deshpande says in conversation with Vimala Rao, 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 in life. She does not want pity; She would do anything for pride. She distances even her husband. The point is, they are both unusual people. People are puzzled by the abandoned wife not feeling bad [18].

Sympathetically showing the weaknesses in men characters, Deshpande shows Sumi’s emergence as a new woman capable of self-actualization and cognizant to question the blind cultural ideas of measuring woman’s happiness in life only through her marital status. Sumi ponders over her mother, Kalyani’s life and sins of patriarchy:

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 wifedom make up for everything for the deprivation of man’s love, for the feel of his body against yours, the warmth of his breath on your face, the touch of his lips on yours... Kalyani lost all this

(had she ever had them?) but her kumkum is intact and she can move in the company of women with the pride of a wife [19].

Reflecting the modern progressive outlook of Sumi, Deshpande shows the paradigm shift in modern Indian women thinking about man-woman relationship, and the conceptual definitions of wifedom and motherhood. Sumi has been shown as an epitome of responsible single mother concerned for daughters’ lives, happiness; at the same time demonstrates her strength and maturity even in adversity. Her maturity is seen in readily accepting Gopal’s decision as she views, “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 [20]”, thus Sumi never questions Gopal and frees him from marital bond without venting ill-feelings.

The texts of contemporary or postmodern Indian women writers explicitly shows more of the sense of insecurity, sense of inferiority or natural dependence in elderly women characters, like Manorama, Kalyani and Sumi; whereas the women characters of young generation like Aru are not ready to impoverish their lives, and go to the extent of echoing Greer’s view, “If woman are to affect a significant amelioration in the condition it seems obvious that they must refuse to marry [21]”. Nonetheless, Indian feminism, though a by-product of the western feminism, shares the paradigms of Indian culture and societal values as opined by Tharu and Lalita in their influential work on *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Early 20th Century*, “Our problems are not the same as those concerns; we cannot, and should not, imbibe, impose and practice what is alien to our social conditions and psyche [22]”.

Deshpande presents women’s acts of resistance to reclaim gender identity in *A Matter Time*, against the patriarchal norms. The characters of Manorama, Kalyani and Sumi possess the freedom to live without refuting relationships as they accept fate as their lot. On the other hand, Aru negates their compromising attitude by her attitude of rejection as she could not wholly accept these roles. Thus, Deshpande subverts the norm – submissiveness of women as an enduring characteristic of Indian society. However, the solution to women’s problems are presented in Deshpande’s novels as Meenakshi Mukherjee says:

Enigmas are concealed in the interstices of silence and nothing is fully explained. The circumstances of the estrangement of Kalyani and Shripati are gradually revealed but the possible causes are left unstated, hinting at something unspeakable.... Deshpande’s ability to leave things unsaid invests the novels with rich inconclusiveness of life [23].

Sisterhood and Womanhood

Sisterhood or woman solidarity, sometimes called sorority, includes the idea and experience of female bonding, and the self-affirmation and identity discovered in a woman-centred vision and definition of womanhood. The concept of sisterhood is based on a clear awareness that all women, irrespective of class, race or nation have a common problem, that is patriarchy. As an important part of contemporary feminism, sisterhood celebrates the unique qualities of female experience. The ultimate aim of feminism is to do away with gender oppression, for a healthy community existence. Deshpande's novels seek to analyse how the category of women as the subject of feminism is produced and restrained by the power structure through which emancipation is sought. However, she defines liberation in the context of Indian feminism not as a means of casting of humanity, leaving one's marriage, doing without the family or doing away with all ties. On the other hand, she defines liberation as a means to refuse oppression, refusing to do things against ones' conscience. She believes that through self-introspection and self-discovery women realise their veiled inner strength to oppose patriarchal domination as we find in Deshpande's novel, *A Matter of Time*; where the characters of Kalyani and Sumi fight against all odds when Shripati and Gopal sever the ties with their families.

DISCUSSION

The novel shows the difference between the values ascribed to gender traits in patriarchal set up in contemporary Indian society. Deshpande questions the relevance of patriarchal ideology as she shows how easily and carelessly men like Shripati and Gopal leave the domestic sphere and life's commitments to show protest against unfulfilled desires. The main plot and sub-plot of the novel have a conflict focusing on the cultural construct - 'son preference', which is predominantly found in all patriarchal societies. The importance of bearing a son is very crucial in patriarchal family for lineage, social domination in society and purification of soul of a man. Deshpande quotes from *Upanishads* in the chapter on "The Family" in *A Matter of Time*, taken from (Bṛhad-aranyaka Upanishad (1.5.17):

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 [24].

Endorsing the ideas from *Upanishads*, Sumi's husband, Gopal is greatly depressed as he has no son to take care of him, and expresses his longing for a son, "For the desire for sons is the desire for wealth and the desire for wealth is the desire for the worlds..." and goes on say that his love for daughters is less tainted, more disinterested [25]", as he feels daughters go to another family after their marriage. This makes him to

desert his family to explore his self in the existential world.

CONCLUSION

Deshpande has shown, it is religion that oppresses women in culture bound societies as the characters, Vithalrao and Gopal, run away from family responsibilities without any feeling of guilt. She further shows that in this game of gender politics, women are victims as well the perpetrates. The life of Manorama was silenced, because she could not bear a son for her husband, and this makes her to hate her daughter Kalyani till her death. The novel also depicts female resistance as a strategy of survival politics/poetics that women adopt in hostile world of oppressions and suppressions. The repressed souls of Kalyani and Sumi bear humiliation throughout their life because they want to support their family. Deshpande valorises Kalyani and Sumi's individualistic resolve to resist their torturers and survive on their terms. Through self-realisation her women characters resolve the conflict in their lives paving a way for a positive social change. Nonetheless, Deshpande has dealt the psychological problems in the life of men and women, as she expressed her desire in one of her interviews [26] (with Vanamala), to reach a stage where she could write about human beings and not about men and women. *A Matter Time* has fulfilled her desire as she unravels the inner conflicts in Gopal, Sumi and Aru's lives.

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