

A Matter of House in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

Deepanshi Ailawadi

MA in English Literature
University of Delhi.

Abstract

A house is simply defined as a place where people live. A large chunk of life is spent in or around a house, from nostalgic childhood memories to decrepit aging. However, hardly any serious attention is paid to the physical structure of house that contribute to the individual's identity formation process. This piece of research throws light upon the inherent connection between home and house with respect to Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* (1996). Recent developments in spatial studies have only begin to explore the place of house in mundane life. The work could be informative for those who wishes to explore the association between housing, place and memory. Apart from the above, the research endeavours to contribute in the meaning of house, not merely a place to live but also a site of identity construction.

Keywords: Memory, House, Home, Place and Identity

Introduction

"There is no place like home."

Frank L. Baum

What is a house? Or home? Fundamentally, both the terms are conflated to define a place where one resides. While emerging scholarship around spatial and architectural studies diachronically analyses a crucial difference between the terms. For instance, (Rykwert 51) explicitly argued that "home is not the same as a house", suggesting a house requires concrete materials such as doors, wall, windows etc while a home can be built anywhere without any architectural boundaries. He traced the association between house and home during the seventeenth century Industrialization era. The emergence of the middle class in the century appended concepts of personal ownership, privacy, domesticity, intimacy and comfort with the house. (Rykwert 53; Mallett 66). Later, the increase in nuclear families around the 1960s and other public housing projects by the government romanticised house ownership for distinctive personal identity and social status (Mallett 66). The popular media and advertising too apotheosize the house ownership to sell real estates. Having said this, many scholars cautioned against the one-dimensional reductive reading of home as house in architectural terms. They maintained that architecture is only an aspect of home. Primarily, the home/house is a multi-layered/ multidimensional concept enclosed within a complex set of meanings (Mallett 68).

Unfortunately, the injudicious debate between house and home have led to sheer ignorance of their complementary nature. In their holistic study, (Blunt and Dowling 254) draws a critical geography of home, expounding that house is not simply a physical structure of the dwelling, but both a “physical location and a set of feeling”. They suggest home/house is a “relation between material and imaginative process”, not separated but influencing each other. Through the quotidian home-making practices, a home is constantly in process, made and re-made to mediate between imaginative home and material home. Memories and values are embodied in the physical structure of the home that is unequivocally designed and ascribed with meanings (23). Hence, it is by dint of the architectural structure of the house that the feeling of homeliness or unhomeliness is ascertained.

In Shashi Deshpande’s novel, *A Matter of time* (1996), the physical structure of a house, ‘The Big House’ is a dwelling place for the characters certainly but, also a reservoir of their memories and a marker of their identities. This paper intends to showcase the position of the house where it emerges as a major character in the novel. I will use the term house hereafter because it efficiently serves my purpose to elucidate that the palpability of house becomes a catalyst for major incidents in the novel.

House, Memory and Self

In her thought provoking study, (Cooper 130) explicates that home is the foremost reflection of the self. The interior of the house, the way an individual decorates his house and the objects he arranges, inherently reflects his identity. For instance, when anyone changes his house, the house initially unwelcomes him and an utter alienation loom in the environment of the house. Gradually, the inhabitants begin to form memories around the four walls, habits, leisure time and other homemaking practices aids an individual to constructs his identity.

Deshpande’s description of the house in the initial pages of the novel implicitly anticipates its crucial role in the narrative. She pulls the readers into “schizophrenic character” of the house, ‘Viswas’, ‘The Big House’ of the novel. Dilapidated and barren as if the house is “holding its breath, waiting for something”. Gradually, the centre of action shifts to the house, unfolding its history dating back to the eighteenth-century reign of Vishwasrao and Madhavrao Peshwa to hidden truths that will destroy the delusive peace of the house. Gopal, a history professor abruptly "walked out" on his wife, Sumi, and three daughters, Aru or Arundhati, Charu, and Seema. Leaving her home behind, Sumi with her daughters arrive at her maternal home, the Big House, owned by Kalyani and Vithalrao, Sumi's parents.

Kalyani reveres the ancient history of the house and its royal lineages. She feels glorious on being a daughter of Manorama and Vithalrao rather than wife of a disinterested husband, Shripati. She gladly exults “There was no house like it in the city” (Deshpande 6). Of course, owning a house is part of the social identity but, Kalyani cherishes her personal identity associated with the house more. Retelling the stories from the past, from her parent's marriage to the formation of the Big House made the house a visible witness of her disdainful life. Ritu Menon notes, in the Afterword of the novel that in Deshpande's works, "the past is the key to the women’s realization of self”. Throughout the novel, Soren Kierkegaard's axiom "Life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards” is running in each characters’ life.

Kalyani identifies herself through these stories and re-cognize herself as an unbroken part of the house. Moreover, the women storytelling undoubtedly played a vital role in construction of their identity. A domain where grandmothers and mothers ascertain the meaning of their lives and transport it to the progeny (Kavanagh 91). With her storytelling, she liberates her past from exile, giving it space in the present and recreating it. Her memories are soaked into the walls of 'Big House' to the extent that it is part of her flesh. It is through another character, Rohit, that readers first take glimpse into how Kalyani and the house were almost a single entity. He noticed how she was caressing the walls of house as if she is "communicating through them with the house" where the house is transforms into "*a living presence*" of Kalyani (Deshpande 126).

Can objects, walls or any non-living things communicate? Perhaps, yes. One of the crucial sub-domains in contemporary Spatial Studies is the scholarship in the Material Memory. While collecting various art facts of partition survivors, (Malhotra 3) defined material memory as "an ability of an object or possession to retain memory". Although, there is no mention of any objects or materials which can be a reservoir of material memory in the house, but the concreteness of house, the walls of house and its possession efficiently evoked Kalyani's memories that were vandalised by her parents' sternness and indifference towards her.

The above act of brushing the hands on the walls awakes the entrenched memories of the house. It is through objects, walls, and architecture that one revises its memories, each time that object reflects a set of buried memories. Kalyani's involuntary habit of telling stories of the house with Goda, her sister, is intricately build around the walls of the house.

The repetitive act of storytelling is Kalyani's habit to relive the past. Deleuze emphasises that individuals are nothing, but habits. The self is constructed via the unconsciously developed habits of individuals, which draw each time something new from repetition which is called "difference" (Wise 304). The difference is not a distance, claims Wise while elucidating Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1994). The difference occurs at each "iteration of repetition" that assists to form the resonance. Each moment of gap between the Kalyani's habit of remembering the past provides the space for resonance. Hence, a house is called a home because of the repetition and differences in the quotidian habits of resurrecting the past memories. The dwellers of the house constantly endeavour to reflect their habits, likes or dislikes, preferences and even profession through the material manifestation of the house. Thus, the physical inhabitation of the place explicitly reflects its dwellers. In turn, the place endows them potential to revise their memories associated to the house.

Kalyani's daughter, Sumi initially felt like an "intruder" in her maternal house. She poignantly remembers a woeful memory of childhood, her father's violence toward Kalyani, her "blood-edged shape" on the door horrified Sumi. She became aware that this past can become her daughter's past too like Kalyani's past is hers. Past wanders as a ghost in lives of Deshpande's characters, they are forever doomed to suffer in the reflection of their past mistakes. Yet, acknowledging the past is only way to recognise the self. Sumi conceives that she cannot disclaim the past, her daughters will also bear the imprint of Sumi's past just like she has "contained" Kalyani's past for years. She questioned herself "what is happening to me now, become part of my daughters too? Will I burden them with my past and my mother's as well?"

(Deshpande 75). The past has transgressed the generation apart and “stained” Sumi and her daughters’ lives.

Deshpande's ‘Big House’ is reluctant to leave the memories of its dwellers. The house thrusts itself on dwellers’ conscience, timely imprinting its presence in their life. For instance, Sumi is unable to forget her house and constantly redraws the structure of the Big House during her house hunt. The image of the house is profoundly submerged in her conscience. Moreover, as with any other character in the novel, the house too reverts to the events. While Kalyani and her sister, Goda were mourning the death of Shripati, the house “exhaled”, “shaken” and “breathe” on his death too. With this personification of the house, the author explicitly endeavours to demonstrate that the house is not merely a place of residence but an unutterable character, a silent witness, a repository of its dwellers' memories.

Ideal home

In simple words, the ideal home is any space or time where a divine solace and contentment with life could be attained. Tucker proposes that people often spend their lives in search of an ideal home. In opposition to an ideal home, the real home is merely an “approximation” of an ideal home with “constraining circumstances” (Tucker 184). Often, the ideal home is associated with family to the extent that they are synonymously perceived. Without the family, a home is merely a house. But what does a family constitute? Scholars analysed the traditional family is constituted of “white, middle class, heterosexual, nuclear family” (Mallett 74). However, the notion of family could include extended family members, and home could be found where extended family members reside (74).

In the novel, Gopal finds his ideal family in his sister cum “link” to his life, Sudha. Gopal felt a completion of himself with Sudha’s marriage that transformed “a house of mourning into a *normal home*”. Gopal’s ideal home constitutes “Man, woman and child. P.K., Sudha and I” (Deshpande 42). A family could be anyone or anything through which one finds himself complete, as Gopal experienced his completion in becoming almost a child of his sister and brother-in-law. However, the ideal home of Gopal is soon going to be annihilated by P. K’s death. The fall of Gopal’s “normal home” and the breakdown of her sister formulate his homelessness again. His poignant soliloquy evinces the transitoriness of life, exclaiming “We bury our fears deep, we stamp hard on the earth, we build our lives on this solid, hard foundation, but suddenly the fears come to life, and the earth shakes with their struggle to surface. It was Sudha, the sight of her when she came to us after her illness, that brought my fear back, so close that the sound of its flapping wings filled my ears to the exclusion of everything else” (Deshpande 51). Gopal’s fear of losing his family suddenly remerged with P. K’s death, his sister’s widowhood and his own orphanage. His decision to go to his childhood house in a hope to collect a few remanences from his past is the last endeavour to construct his association with the past but, he was unable to connect with his house because he had no memory of it. Lastly, the epiphany arrives when Gopal ascertained that he cannot “disclaim” his past and he decided to abandon his wife and daughters because he was “frightened of the emptiness” within himself (Deshpande 50). Along with losing his sense of belongingness to any family and house, he began to question his existence.

Home is essentially an identity rooted in family, friends, community and sometimes in nation too. When this family disintegrates, an individual loses his place of attachment and security. In the context of the physical destruction of houses during urban development and colonization, (Porteous and Smith 61) defined two meanings associated with home, firstly, the home as the centre, a place of refuge and security and secondly, home as identity, bound with "family friends and neighbours". They professed that losing each one of the above potentially leads to a "partial loss of identity".

Similarly, Gopal's loss of identity befalls with disintegration of his family. He realises man's doomed loneliness. Sudha's suffering potentially exhibits that despite forming relationships in the world, at the end there is an utter loneliness. "Emptiness" is forever waiting for the man, in this way he denounces his love and relationship with his family, he continued, "all human ties are masquerade" (Deshpande 52). Even his marriage to Sumi is an implicit endeavour to fill the abyssal gap in his life. In Gopal's words, Sumi is "soaked" in the history of her family that is embodied by the Big House (Deshpande 94). In the hope to complete himself and fulfil his disintegrated *family*, he married her. His breakdown occurred when he conceded his past. A dismal past that pushed him to realise that Sumi and his daughters cannot erase or compensate for the past. Thus, to prevent his family from his unfathomable nothingness, he left them. Finally, in the end, he attains solace when he gains his family in Aru's utterance of "papa". A light of hope emerges in his heart that he might reside in the Big House with his daughters and become a part of the Big House. Consequently, Gopal regains his identity and acquires a long-lost *ideal home* in Kalyani's Big House.

Conclusion

The architectural space of the house is a melting point for the generations separated by time, Manorama, Kalyani, Sumi and Aru converged below the roof of the Big House. In her earlier novels too, Deshpande evocatively constructs the story around the house. In *The Dark Hold's No Terror* (1980), Sara returned to her maternal home, and in *That Long Silence* (1989), Jaya began writing in her small enclosed apartment just like Deshpande did in her earlier phase of writing. However, in *A Matter of Time* (1996), it is "most powerfully evoked", Menon claimed (Deshpande, 259). The house is the epicentre where each strand of the story is disentangled from Kalyani's abandonment of her disabled son to Gopal's rebirth at the end.

House is the essential element in Deshpande's novels because "it is there that it is going to happen", the author exclaims (Deshpande 259). What are the two "it"? The former one, of course, the house, the latter one is the main action. In his study of various meanings of house, (Després 98) claims that house is "the centre of activities". Similarly, Deshpande's novels are primarily constructed around the domestic sphere of women, Menon claimed that the locale in her novels has a specific role to play, her "ordinary people" such as doctors, teacher and lawyers, husbands and wives, children's lives revolve around the ordinary house/home, without this physical space they are nothing (Deshpande 252).

Extending the scope of house/home is not plainly to allocate multiple meanings around its nomenclature but to untangle the misconception that one of them is superior to the other, they

work coherently, " the material form of home is dependent on what home is imagined to be, and imaginaries of home are influenced by the physical forms of dwelling." (Blunt and Dowling 22). In conclusion, Deshpande's work effectively blurs the boundary between House/Home in order to demonstrate the significance of Self in relation to the physical space inhabited by the individuals. The House/Home cooperatively witness stories weaved around the walls. *A Matter of Time* becomes A Matter of House since *Time* is gripped in the unmoved history of the house in the novel. Each character's identity is fundamentally either attached to the big house or detached from it. Thus, Deshpande depicted that House is not merely a place of living but a place of being, in Heideggerian style.

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