

**The Marginalized Women in Shashi Deshpande's 'A Matter of Time'**

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**THE ABSTRACT**

*Shashi Deshpande, one of the most popular names in the field of Indian English fiction, started her literary career with the publication of her first story in 1970. Her collection of short stories was published in 1978 whereas her first novel, 'The Dark Holds No Terrors', came out in 1980. Her novel, 'That Long Silence', won her the 'Sahitya Academy Award' and 'Nanjangad Thirumlamaba Award'. She was also awarded Padma Shri in 2009 for her significant contribution to Indian English novel. As a well-known woman novelist, she is basically concerned with the theme of human relationships with the woman at the core of these relationships, and with the woman's struggle for self-assertion and self-realization in a callous and malignant male-dominated contemporary Indian society. She deals with sorrows and sufferings, issues and problems, plight and predicament, suppression and exploitation, and pain and agony of the victimized and marginalized middle-class Indian women caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy in her novels. Her women are helpless creatures who live in an unavoidable, inexplicable and oppressive silence accepting their lives as their destiny, and who suffer a lot on account of issues such as gender-discrimination, male-ego and male-domination deeply rooted in Indian patriarchy. She, an Indian feminist, openly champions the rights of women with their marginalized existence and raises a voice of protest against their suppression, subjugation and exploitation. Her novels, sincere and authentic products of her experiences as an Indian woman, to a large extent, are women-oriented. The present article intends to explore the tragic lot of middle-class Indian women in her novel, 'A Matter of Time', a multi-generational tale.*

**Key Words:** anamat, exploitation, marginalized, multi-generational, plight, predicament, victimized.

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Shashi Deshpande, a winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, has been basically concerned with the projection of the destiny of middle-class Indian women caught in the trap of a contemporary Indian patriarchal society in her novels. Her female characters, major as well as minor, are the typical Indian creatures who suffer silently and ungrudgingly in Indian conventional and traditional milieu. She has portrayed the realistic pictures of educated middle-class Indian women with their feminine traits and features, their strengths and weaknesses. Herself being a woman, she is worried about the plight and predicament, sorrows and sufferings, suppression and exploitation of Indian women. She gives a deep insight into the inner psyche and consciousness of Indian women with their pain, agony, sorrows, sufferings, fears, anxieties, dilemmas, and their dreams and aspirations. She explores and exposes a tragic and pathetic condition of her women protagonists imprisoned within the four walls of their parental homes as well as their marital homes. Like the novels of Jane Austen, her novels, to a large extent, are women-oriented and they deal with the theme of women's unending and hopeful struggle for freedom, self-assertion and self-realization, and their quest for identity in this cruel, callous and malignant male-dominated Indian society. She raises her feminine voice of protest against subjugation, suppression, oppression and exploitation of women in the name of gender-discrimination.

Indian society, as we know, belongs to the man since time immemorial. The woman has been controlled and dominated by the males. She has been facing humiliation, injustice, suppression, oppression, subjugation and exploitation in the world of males. She has been given the secondary and inferior position in her family and society. In spite of being educated, she has been looked down upon with contempt. She has been reduced to the status of a plaything and a machine, a lifeless object used to fulfil a man's sexual desire. She appears to the male merely as a sexual being. Everything in her life has been shaped and ultimately directed to the one and only purpose of pleasing the male. She, according to Eva Figs, is regarded as a passive and helpless creature which is forced to respect the male

sexual drive for the subsequent reproduction of the species. (Figs 125). This observation highlights the nature of male-oriented tradition which considers marriage a social necessity that imposes the role of a child-bearing machine on the female. The woman differs from her male-counterpart in the sense that she pursues a dream of submission while a man a dream of domination and identification. It is unfortunate she cannot share the world in equality as the world belongs to the males. She has always been a mute and silent sufferer who totally depends on her male counterpart.

She is not regarded as a free and independent individual. She has no existence apart from her male-counterpart. In this regard, Simone de Beauvoir writes: "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being". (Beauvoir 16). She is simply what a man sees, defines and decrees. She is just what a man wants her to be. She is defined and understood only with reference to a man. Beauvoir has pin-pointed some fundamental questions related to the female world. The questions are: "How can a human being in woman's situation attain fulfillment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman's liberty and how can they be overcome?" (Beauvoir 29). It is very difficult to answer these questions. The patriarchal domination has been an inseparable part of Indian society. Jessica Benjamin observes: "The anchoring of this structure so deep in the psyche is what gives domination its appearance of inevitability, makes it seem that a relationship in which both participants are subjects - both empowered and mutually respectful - is impossible". (Benjamin 85-86). The woman is destined to passively and helplessly submit to her husband's desire.

She does not have her own dreams and aspirations, her self and identity. This is her inevitable and unavoidable tragedy. Indira Kulkshreshtha opines: "Generally, a woman's identity is defined in terms of her relationship with man as a daughter, a wife and a mother; it means virtually a woman doesn't have an identity of her own". (Kulkshreshtha 1987). She is not allowed to enjoy the status and dignity of being an individual who is equal to a man. She sees herself in her husband's shadow, lives as her husband wants her to live, and behaves as her husband wants her to behave. She follows her husband willingly and ungrudgingly. She accepts her husband as a sheltering tree. Though, she suffers a lot on account of the male-ego and male-domination, she considers herself incomplete, almost nothing without her husband. We should salute her silence, endurance, tolerance and sacrifice.

Veena Das says: "Daughters are comparable to something kept in trust for another (*Anamat*). You have to care for them, love them, and you will be held responsible for them but you are destined to use them. Once a daughter is properly married and goes on to her own house, it is like a debt that has been paid". (Das 93). She is destined to close herself in the cage of marriage and patriarchy. To be true, marriage, as an institution, plays a vital role in the life of a man and a woman, especially that of a woman. Ideally, it is a special kind of friendship, a special kind of partnership between husband and wife, the success of which

depends upon love and trust, adjustment and compromise. However, the woman suffers a lot on account of the evils like gender-discrimination and marital-violence. Before her marriage, she remains a servant of her father or her brothers, and it is the marriage that enslaves her to her husband. She is treated as a 'thing' to be passed on from her parents to her husband. The present paper intends to highlight the plight and predicament of the marginalized female creatures, before and after their marriage, projected in Deshpande's novel, *A Matter of Time*.

*A Matter of Time* is a multi-generational story which exposes the root causes responsible for the plight and predicament, suppression and exploitation of four Indian women, Manorama, Kalyani, Sumitra and Arundhati, victimized creatures caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy. It moves around Gopal and Sumi's middle-class family with their three daughters, Arundhati, Charulata and Seema. Gopal's walking out of his marriage for the reasons nobody knows forces all the female members of the family to face loss, pain and agony. Sumi and her daughters are the victims of Gopal's desertion which destroys the very peace and happiness of the family. Shripati's bringing Sumi back to the Big House after Gopal's desertion is a matter of shame and disgust both for Aru, her eldest daughter and Kalyani, her mother. Kalyani herself was the cause of dissatisfaction for her mother, Manorama, who failed to give a gift of a male heir to the family, a dream of an Indian woman. Manorama with her unfulfilled urge to have a son was not happy with her daughter, Kalyani who was given away in marriage to Shripati.

Kalyani becomes a typical Indian wife after her marriage. Her marital life has been deeply rooted in unbelievable silence and tolerance. Her pain and agony, plight and predicament as an Indian wife are heartrending. Sumi is frightened to see the photograph of her parents, husband and wife. She watches: "A classic post-wedding picture, bride and groom formally posed against a dark background, the bride sitting in a chair, the groom by her . . . She is looking not at the camera, but at someone standing by the photographer, the uncertain look of a child seeking approval . . . The man on the other hand is stern, his eyes hooded, arms folded across his chest in the usual 'manly pose' . . . But the sternness here is not a pose, it is real. And the way he is standing, he gives the impression of being by himself, wholly unaware of the girl standing by him, his wife". (Deshpande 25-26). This is indeed a photograph of a middle-class Indian husband and wife, the husband standing with sternness and pride, while his wife sitting with uncertain look and the absence of confidence on her face. There has been a frightening and oppressive silence between them. Aru is haunted by a number of questions when she finds a dead silence between her grandparents. She interrogates herself: "Why doesn't Baba ever come down? Why doesn't he have his meals here with the rest of us? Why doesn't he ever speak to Kalyani? She is his wife, isn't she? And why is she so frightened of him?" (Deshpande 39). The silence between them is a kind of mysterious riddle for a young girl like her.

Aru learns from Premi that while coming home to Bangalore for the holidays, Kalyani lost Madhav, her mentally retarded 'son' at the V. T. station. Premi says: "Baba had

gone to check the reservations, leaving Amma with the children. When he returned, the boy wasn't there . . . He was never found . . . Baba has not spoken to her since the day it happened". (Deshpande 140). Kalyani's real tragedy begins with the missing of her four-year-old son. In a response to Aru's question, "Do you think she let him wander away and said nothing?" (Deshpande 141), Premi says: "I don't think so, Aru. How could she? No mother could possibly do such a thing. It was an accident". (Deshpande 141-142). She believes that the affection of the Indian mother for her baby, a baby boy, though mentally retarded, will never allow her to do it deliberately. However, for Aru the question still remains: "And if she didn't do it, why didn't she explain? Why didn't she defend herself?" (Deshpande 143). She is too young to know that a typical woman like Kalyani is born and destined to suffer silently in Indian patriarchal set-up.

Aru finds Kalyani's silence inexplicable and mysterious. What she minds is injustice done to her. She feels that it is important for the woman to speak out, to state the truth, to stand up and to defend herself so that she is not misunderstood and misjudged. She wants Kalyani to break her silence. Kalyani, however, uses 'silence' as a weapon to bear the sordid reality of her marital life. She proves her miraculous strength, the strength of the Indian woman, by surviving intact in spite of what her husband did to her. Sumi, Aru and others are surprised at Kalyani's living her life silently and ungrudgingly. Sumi feels that a fear of widowhood, perhaps, has made her tolerate everything in her life. She wonders: "Is this what has helped Kalyani to endure everything, the fact that she is a wife and not a widow?" (Deshpande 167). She remembers the tray of *kumkum*, *paan-supari* and coconut, the symbols of wifedom and also the old woman's words, 'What is a woman without a husband?' She thinks: "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?" (Deshpande 167). It is true that an Indian woman prefers wifedom to widowhood.

On Sumi's coming back to her parental home with her daughters as a deserted wife, Kalyani finds the echo of her own misery in her daughter's life. The family tries to take her into confidence and to comfort her. For them, Sumi is a puzzle difficult to be solved, a mystery, and an enigma. However, Sumi knows that getting answers to the questions beginning with 'why', will not provide her with any solution to her plight. She thinks to herself: "I know that they find it impossible to believe that I have not asked him anything. The truth is, I could not have spoken to him that night - no, it was impossible. But even if it had been possible, if I had asked him 'why', would I have got an answer I could have made sense of? . . . And yet, if I meet Gopal I will ask him one question . . . What is it, Gopal, that makes a man in this age of acquisition and possession walk out on his family and all that he owns? Because . . . it was you who said that we are shaped by the age we live in, by the society we are part of. How then can you, in this age, a part of this society, turn your back on everything in your life?" (Deshpande 27). But unfortunately, she, being an Indian woman, keeps these questions to herself. She is compelled to live without her husband for



the reason nobody knows. It is difficult for the woman to live independently away from her living husband. She remembers what Nagaraj said during her search for a new house: "Don't tell people your husband is not living with you . . . People think wrongly, sometimes they take advantage of you". (Deshpande 79).

During her final visit to Gopal, her husband, she is determined to finish what he began the night he spoke to her about his decision to walk away. She says to him: "Do you remember . . . what you said to me the night I came to your room, the night we decided to get married? You said that at any time if either of us wanted to be free, the other would let go. We are not going to be tied together . . . And I agreed . . . But it meant nothing to me then. How can you think of separating, of wanting to be apart, when you are eighteen and in love? . . . I never thought of you leaving me alone . . . Then you began to leave away from me . . . And I had to go back home with my daughters, I had to live with my parents, I had to see what happened to my mother. I was frightened. It seemed like something being repeated - my mother then, me now". (Deshpande 221-222). The plight of the Indian woman, represented both by Sumi and her mother, lies in the fact that she has to accept her husband's decision. She has no 'say' in her marital life. Though, it is Gopal, who leaves his wife and daughters, Shankar's mother expects Sumi to save her marriage. Indian tradition expects the woman to keep her pride and self-respect aside to save the marriage.

Kalyani and Sumi are not the only women who suffer in Indian patriarchy. The truth is that all married women in the novel are the victims of exploitation. Aru, a representative young girl of the fourth generation, finds Manorama as a domineering figure, Kalyani as an enduring figure, and Sumi, as a cold and indifferent figure in marriage. With her knowledge of their marital experiences, she steps into her womanhood with a decision not to marry. She is frightened and irritated at the very thought of marriage. She is uneasy and restless after her father's desertion. Her reaction to her mother's words, 'I don't care' is sharp and violent. She bursts out: "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 - but I care, yes, I do, I care about Papa having left us, I care about not having our own house. 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". (Deshpande 21). She is pining for her father, for her own home. Though, she tries her level best, she fails in her attempt to bring her parents together.

Premi, Sumi's sister, mother of a seven-year-old son, wife of a prosperous lawyer, is worried about Sumi. The moment she comes to her parental home, she gets into the skin of a frightened child, Premi. She is reminded of the blank stare with a question: 'Why are you here?' She remembers that her father did not speak to her until she was ten. The atmosphere in the house was always tense and silent with her father in his room upstairs, never coming out, never speaking to anybody; and her mother always mysteriously silent. She was brought up in a family in which freedom was denied to women. The first time her father talked to her was when she completed her medical education. She was summoned only to be told that she would be marrying Anil. Being a typical Indian young girl, she had no role to

play in selecting her life-partner. Devaki too proves herself a typical Indian wife by moulding herself in the kind of life her husband, Vasudev Murthy, a successful architect from a distinguished family, wants her to live. Her life moves around her husband. After her marriage, she fits herself into the mould of a typical Indian woman. Goda, another typical Indian woman, always takes delight in making complaints against her husband, Satyanarayan, an easy-tempered man, a good provider and a cheerful companion, laying his jokes at Goda's feet like homage, and even after forty years of marriage, devoted to his wife. She is lucky enough to have a loving husband like him.

Yamunabai, a daughter of a well-to-do landlord, is a unique social reformer. She comes back to her parental home as a young widow. Instead of living a secure and comfortable life, she decides to devote herself to the realization of her vision of setting girls and women free from the slavery of endless drudgery and childbearing through education. She opens a school to serve her purpose. Manorama is sent to Yamunabai's school at a time when schooling for a girl is something that can come in the way of her marriage prospects. It is Yamunabai who is really responsible for a drastic change in Manorama. Manorama, previously a girl trapped in the drudgery of looking after her younger siblings, changes into the girl catching the attention of the people and the result is her marriage with Vithalrav. Manorama is not happy in her marital life as she fails to give birth to a son. She is not pleased even with Kalyani, who gives birth to three daughters and a mentally retarded son.

Almost all marriages in Deshpande's novels are tragic failures. There has been a strangely oppressive silence between Kalyani and Shripati for more than thirty-five years of their marital life. Sumi suffers on account of marital monotony, routine and indifference. She, being a victim of her husband's desertion, follows her mother and lapses into a complete silence, and does not share her agony and suffering with any member of her family. It is the marriage that makes an Indian woman forget her dreams and aspirations, her self and identity. She is born and destined to be a victim of gender-discrimination, male-ego, male-domination and marital-violence deeply rooted in Indian patriarchy. She is denied even to know what she wants; no, she does not know what she really wants. Her tragedy lies in the fact that she is denied to be a free individual; she is denied a separate existence apart from her male-counterpart. She is recognized only with reference to her relationships with others. She is known as someone's daughter, someone's sister, someone's wife, someone's mother, and someone's someone. She willingly and ungrudgingly accepts the role of a typical Indian woman looking after and nurturing her family.

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