

Expression of Motherhood in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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ABSTRACT

Indian Writing In English has gained global prominence. There are many writer's in India who are using English language as a medium for their creative expression. This trend has heralded a era in fiction and has taken to new heights. The genre of fiction is a reflection of human life, society experience, beliefs, and aspirations. In fiction writing .the Indian women writers have made rapid strides in terms of achievement. Their works exactly mirror the contemporary world where the helpless women undergo all sorts of sorrows in a patriarchal world. Sashi Deshpande is a household name in Indian Writing in English .She ensured through her novels that the readers get sensitized to the burning issues of the society. Her novels are written with Indian background and it has proved to be her specialty. Her characters settings and conflicts faced are absolutely Indian. She has proved to be an excellent story teller.

Motherhood has become virtual wasteland with the rise of feminism. Women liberation association looks motherhood as a degrading idea and a trap to keep women barefoot and pregnant. The children who do not get mothers care, probably do not become good citizens .This ultimately would damage the whole fabric of society. To be a mother is the holy privilege. Children are a gift from God. Shashi Deshpande ,being woman, is deeply concerned with the concept of motherhood in her novel *A Matter Of Time*. This paper is an attempt to elucidate this experience in the selected novel as textual study.

Keywords: Motherhood, Feminism, family, society

I. INTRODUCTION

Motherhood, according to Oxford Dictionary is, "The condition or fact of being a mother: the feeling or love of mother". Motherhood means selfless devotion, pure and complete love which is accorded by a mother. In the words of Abraham Lincoln "All that I am or hope to be, I owe to my mother angel" Thus, mother plays the most important role in the construction of society. To be a mother is a holy privilege from God. Children are a gift from God. The monument of virgin Mary cradling baby Jesus represents motherhood. While a mother enjoys taking care of children, motherhood also poses some difficulties and responsibilities which are exemplary "There is no other role that offers the joys, the challenges, the responsibilities and the potential power to influence and shape the society" (Steele 182). With the rise of feminism, motherhood has become a virtual wasteland. French Philosopher Simone de Beauvoir says that a "woman's enslavement is expressed most clearly and inescapably in her capacity for procreation". Feminism gives impetus to the theory of economic freedom which comes from working outside instead of being a mother. The Bible has stressed that the primary role of a woman is home making. This does not mean that Bible has forbidden women from economic freedom. However this role should be supplementary to her role as a home maker. Mothers should be careful that they work out of necessity and not out of desire to have things or freedom. The idea that the less civilized a nation, the lower is women's status in it should not be mistaken The children, who do not get mother's care, probably do not become good citizens. This ultimately would damage the whole fabric of society. Therefore, "Motherhood is the total concept of creation, protection and love. It is the expression of all that is good in human existence. It elevates women to sublime heights" (Punikunnel 1) Shashi Deshpande being a woman is deeply concerned with the concept of motherhood in her novel *A Matter of Time*. This paper is an attempt to elucidate this experience in the selected novel in a textual study.

Shashi Deshpande, winner of the Sahitya Academy Award, is one of the most significant Indian women writers. She began to write in 1970 and has published more than seventy shorts stories, eight novels and four books for children. Deshpande's sympathy and concern are undoubtedly for women. Though her protagonists are educated and bold, and are assigned their stereotypical roles of mother and wife, they find after sometime this male dominated environment frustrating and choking like the poet Kamala Das. Not only women, but everybody has to live in relationships, and the relationships lead to family. Her novels generally pivot round family relationships.

Sumi, the protagonist of *A Matter of Time* has been "beautiful and graceful from her childhood, effortlessly almost without wanting to, gathering friends around herself" (104). She is Devaki's childhood idol. In addition to her beauty she possesses a lot of other good and rare qualities. She has "no trace of vanity" though she is proud of her "memory and quickness" (212). After being abandoned by her husband, she exhibits boundless patience. She has a cool temperament and practical attitude towards life. When Sumi introduces Hrishi to Gopal, he is surprised at her ease with strangers. Her sister Premi is aware of these qualities and considers Sumi superior to her: "She was ahead of me and I was always trailing behind, never able to catch up with her" (17) Sumi does not have hatred for anybody, as she tells Aru that she is not "a good hater" and that "she can't retain her anger or hatred for long" (194).

Sumi, mother Kalyani, is most important and powerful character in this novel. Kalyani's story exhibits deep endurance and pain as Sumi says. "Kalyani's past, which she has contained

within herself, careful never to spill it out, has nevertheless entered into us... it has strained our bones" (75). Manorama, Kalyani's Mother had expected her daughter to be beautiful accomplished and make a wonderful marriage so that she could come out of the image of a poor man's daughter. Kalyani was good at academics. But Manorama did not allow her to complete her studies. She was taken out of the school and married to Manorama's own brother Shripati. "Perhaps after this Manorama felt secure. The property will remain in the family now" (129). It is only when Kalyani gave birth to a boy Madhav that Manorama was happy with Kalyani, though the boy was mentally retarded. But the boy was lost at the railway station when Kalyani was going to her parents. Her husband, Shripati never spoke to Kalyani thereafter. Kalyani considers herself a great disappointment to her parents because she was a girl. Despite of this oppressive silence, Kalyani's affection for other members of family remains same. She acts like an anchor in this ill-starred family. Her daughter Sumi recognizes the great contribution of this woman as Deshpande says: "In fact, noticing the complex net relationships that Kalyani has with so many people, She (Sumi) is reminded of the spider she had seen one morning, scuttling from point to point, drawing silken threads out of itself, weaving in the process of a web with a beautiful design" (185). Kalyani is shocked when she comes to know about Gopal's desertion of his family. She tells Gopal that it is Sumi, who is responsible for this tragedy: "how could she (Sumi) have known what being a good wife means when she never saw her mother being one? I taught her nothing it is my fault, Gopala forgive me and do not punish her for it" (47). Kalyani's character represents self-sacrifice. Sumi acquires an attitude of silent suffering and passive resistance like all emotional mothers. The formation of Sumi's identity in such an environment decided her role as a future mother.

Sumi is always conscious of her duty as a mothers. She is the epitome of motherly love, care and concern. Every moment Sumi is seen worried about her elder daughter Aru because she is very sensitive. When Sumi was held responsible by her daughters for what Gopal has done to them, Sumi does not react wildly, though she is hurt emotionally: "Do they think it is my fault? Why I can't talk to them, tell them what I feel, how it was? Why can't I open my heart to them" (123). She does not want her daughters to get disturbed by this tragedy. She tries to fill the void created after this incident, as the novelist says: "She shows no outward signs of distress, but three girls noticed a new habit in her, of touching them, of holding their hands, smoothing their hair, as if this physical contact is a manifestation of some intense emotion within her" (33).

Sumi was not able to sleep when Aru had been suffering from fever and was bed ridden. When Sumi tells Aru that she (Sumi) had dropped to sleep, Aru says, "But you didn't, you woke up to give me water..... Then who did?" (38). After Gopal's desertion, Ramesh offers financial help to Sumi, but she does not accept it. Ramesh is very keen on helping her and tries to persuade Sumi by referring to her daughters' marriage. Novelist says, "Sumi laughs, but the topic of her daughter marriage is one she can't really ignore" (124). Thus, Sumi is worried about her daughters' future, as later she says, "But I do worry, I have to worry about their marriage. I know they will stand on their own feet, I have no fears for Aru and Charu, not on that count" (169). One day when Sumi and Aru were travelling by scooter, met an accident. Aru was seriously injured, while Sumi got minor injuries. Ramesh happened to pass through that way and took them to hospital. When Ramesh tells her that Aru has recovered consciousness, she feels normal but does not let them attend to her bruises until she had seen Aru. Sumi, then adjusts herself to the little space by Aru's body and falls asleep. She wakes up

in the morning and tries to remember where she is and why. Charu starts laughing and asks her, "Well, who is the patient here" (119). Her usual behavior makes it so difficult for them to understand the enormity of what has happened, as Deshpande mentions: "To the astonishment of her daughters. Sumi's routine that day is as usual. They are baffled, but as if she has set the tone for them, they go through the motions of their normal routine as well. Sumi's calmness, her normality makes it possible for them to think it was only a quarrel" (10). Inspired by their mother Sumi, the three girls overcome the shock given by their father Gopal. Aru's reaction has changed into a secret. She concentrates on her studies and college. Charu has become single minded and is striving hard for a seat in medical college. Seema looks most untouched. Sumi thinks, "I don't want my daughters to live with a hand clasped over their mouth, like Premi and I had to" (59). Thus, Sumi is successful in her role as a mother.

After Gopal's desertion, her father brings Sumi and her daughters to their ancestral "Big House." Her husband's desertion makes her feel the trauma of a deserted wife and the anguish of an isolated partner. Sumi is so self-controlled that she would not even talk of this incident. She is keen to get on with life and wants her daughters to do the same. People think that Sumi takes Gopal's desertion a matter of fact, but she undergoes her own inner suffering, "It takes time to get used to sharing your life with another person, now I have to get used to being alone" (23). Sumi's self-respect doesn't allow herself to accept help from relatives. "Deshpande invests all the women characters with an inner strength and resilience that gives them the capacity not only to cope but to "let go" and "move on" (Bhalla 69). Sumi decides to learn driving which is her first step towards an independent existence. At "Big House", she feels herself a burden on others. She starts searching for her own house, but doesn't tell other members of the family about this as is evident: "Sumi has so far kept the house hunting crusade a secret from everyone, even from her daughters, but Aru and Charu see her with Nagraj and it is out" (78). Sumi starts searching for a job. She is able to relate herself to the world. She writes a play entitled 'The Gardner's Son and proposes to write another. She admits, "It feels so good- And now suddenly I want to do so many things" (231). Aru advises Sumi to take legal action against Gopal to which she replies: "Do you want to punish him? 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). Finally Sumi succeeds in getting a job at Devgiri. Sumi is happy, as she tells Aru, "Be happy for me Aru. This is the first thing in my life I think in my life I think that I got myself" (104). Thus she is ready to start a new life. Siddhartha Sharma observes this change in her: "Now she is a new woman with a new understanding and consciousness, all set to begin her life anew and confidently as a teacher and a creative writer" (63). But unfortunately, Sumi dies in a road accident, just before she was about to join at Devgiri. Sumi has established her own identity and found a meaningful existence before her death.

Sumi respects her husband deeply, as in the beginning of the novel, we find that when Gopal enters the house and she is watching TV, her body automatically shifts to make place for Gopal on sofa. In spite of various reasons being speculated behind Gopal's desertion, it is Sumi who comes to the closest. She has always been aware of Gopal's disillusionment with relationship. Sumi is regarded by Gopal as the mythic Parvati, wife of Shiva, "drawing all the colour and movement... into herself... filling him with astonishment and delight" (45). She has no hatred for Gopal and does not want to sue him for his peculiar action. She has been successful in her duty towards her family. Chanchala K. Naik's comments are pertinent here:

Although Deshpande advocates for an ideal family set up where both men and women avail equal opportunities and privileges, where cooperation, compromises and

companionship prevail, she calls it absurd and unjust if feminism urges women to be dissatisfied with being housewives, to desert husbands and families and rush to divorce at the smallest pretext. (225)

Sumi is dedicated to her husband, children and other members of the family. But she suffers for no faults of her own. Though her husband abandons her without any obvious reason, she has no hatred for him. She proves herself to be an ideal mother. Her children become the catalyst in her journey towards self-actualization. Sumi doesn't have her own space where she can offer herself exclusive contemplation. Her space is occupied by her children, her husband and other members of the family. She finds independence in affiliation: separation was thrust upon her by her husband. It is always there in Sumi's mind that marriage is her biggest asset and her worth is measured through her marital status, though any hope of reconciliation is gone with Sumi's untimely death. Thus, Sumi embraces an ideal image of motherhood and womanhood. These are the most important and well accepted institutions in the making of "Indianness" even today. Even Ashish Nandy, the critic and philosopher thinks that in India it is the concept of motherhood that carries on the traditional family values and respect from one generation to another. Even the sacred texts declare that mother is the first teacher of a child. That is why wherever a woman is respected, there lies the blessings of God Almighty. Thus woman is an epitome of a true friend, a true teacher a true mother to all human beings. In Shashi Deshpande's novel *A Matter of Time*, one could easily conclude that despite having natural and innate qualities of care, share, love, sympathy and kindness in woman, her supreme quality and experience lies in motherhood which stands as a universal truth in the universe.

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