

Feministic Interpretation of Protagonist's Evolvement Through Time as Represented in Shashi Deshpande's 'A Matter of Time'

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As the title of the novel suggests, it is indeed a matter of time that through various stages and by degrees, change eventually takes place in any arena whether it is a socio-cultural set up, a political field or an economic sphere and others. "In many ways the development of feminism in India is similar to that in western Europe or the United States : like them India too saw a feminist movement in the early Twentieth century: like them again the movement gradually died away after the winning of certain demands, until recently a new feminist movement developed out of contemporary radical movements in India, from student uprisings, workers' agitations and peasants in surgencies to tribal anticaste and consumer action movements." This paper undertakes to explore, define and highlight the different stages which a woman undergoes while journeying from her traditional role, through conspicuous shift in her beliefs and ideology, to her vibrant and empowered self in modern era. The novel traces the pattern of development of capabilities of woman delineated with reference to three generations represented by completely conventional Kalyani, creative and changing Sumi and rebellious and independent Arundhati. The features, manners, beliefs and value system of these three characters form a graph showing the constantly increasing confidence, self esteem, decision making power and self worth of woman.

In the first generation, a character namely Kalyani symbolises the traditional woman generally expected to be cool, quiet, peaceful, patient, soft spoken, tolerant, submissive, adjusting, compromising and sacrificing for the male ego and the projected welfare of the family. Shashi Deshpande here presents a familial and social set up chiefly governed by the patriarchal system. This is a kind of society which gives undue importance, value and reliability to male concerns, issues, beliefs, thinking pattern and ideology. On the contrary, the preferences, principles, ideals and emotions of woman carry no weightage or value in this phallogocentric world. "Recent form of feminism that came to existence after 1960s has become an evolving socio-political movement. It is a theoretical project, which aims at understanding the power structures in the society, male domination, social practices and social institutions,

which are instrumental in assigning a marginalized position to women. Feminist theory also devises the strategies to transform the social structures, which can help in the emancipation. The strong wave in the 1960s and 1970s helped to theories a woman's discourse. In 1980s, 'Feminism' concentrated on transforming the individual fields and in 1990s began a major role in directing academic focus on the concern of the so-called 'otherness', differences and questions of marginality."

Kalyani has been experiencing this kind of prejudiced conduct on the part of society right from her own childhood. Her mother blamed her for 'not being a son.' This event clearly establishes the thinking pattern of orthodox society. A mother is shown as blaming her own daughter for her existence in the form of a female. Shashi Deshpande questions and strongly but indirectly protests against such system. G.S. Amur in his preface to Shashi Deshpande, *The Legacy & Other Stories* (1978) has rightly maintained "Women's struggle, in the context of contemporary society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being..." (10) as Shashi Deshpande's chief concern in her writings.

It's a matter of concern what effect could such a belief and value system cause on the psychology of a child. In a way, right from the childhood, Kalyani has been made painfully aware of the biased approach and gender discrimination prevalent in the society.

Deshpande reveals how do the small and apparently trivial incidents affect the course of one's life, when Kalyani enters into a wedlock with Shripati, she finds herself in a similar world dominated by patriarchal set-up. Her childhood and pre-marriage experiences have qualified her to exist and survive in this social scenario. She knows well the value of silence in relationship with a man, that too with a husband. The lack of communication between Kalyani and her husband is the hallmark of their conjugal life. The similar silence in the similar relationship is remarkably presented by the novelist in her magnificent work 'That Long Silence,' as the title itself underlines. We can also say that the success of their relationship lies in the complete submission of woman to man's will and ego. The novelist here presents in the form of Kalyani a completely conventional view of a 'sati savitri' sort of woman. Basavaraj Naikar points out that Kalyani spends nearly forty years in total silence with her husband Shripati. (Masal 144) In their marital relationship, she is not given freedom or space enough to voice her views, preferences, desires and ambitions. She is considered as a mere doll or puppet having no human feelings of her own, what so ever. She is supposed to unquestioningly follow the footsteps of her 'infallible' husband. He is there to decide for her.

In fact, this is the stark reality of our conventional society which Shashi Deshpande seeks to betray in her works. If we examine and analyse the traditions critically, we will come across a conspicuous gender discrimination in them in favour of the male counterpart. This is exactly what Kalyani in her life feels and undergoes various kinds of torture. “Kalyani 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. Her punishment is that she has to live with this psychic wound.”(Masal 147) The novelist portrays the realistic situation of a woman in traditional familial set up. First of all, only a mother can imagine and understand what does losing a child mean. The agony & loss are indeed irrevocable. This is a psychic vacuum which always looms large at the back of the mind of a mother. Further, considering whether the lost child was a boy or girl is inhuman. Commenting on Deshpande’s art of character portrayal in the light of feministic view, Y.S. Sunita Reddy opines, “She gives us a peep into the state and condition of the present day woman who is intelligent and articulate, aware of her capabilities, but thwarted under the weight of male chauvinism” (Reddy 146). However, the society’s collective ideology leaves a deep imprint on the consciousness of a woman. That’s why even a mother starts blaming herself and considers herself incomplete without a male heir. However, Kalyani always longs for keeping her daughter Sumi away from the sort of experiences she has been enduring in her life.

Ironically enough, Sumi has an almost similar destiny in store for her. Kalyani fears about the destiny of her daughter Sumi, a representative of the second generation. Her fears come true when Gopal, Sumi’s husband leaves Sumi and their children and goes away to lead his life alone. Here again the novelist strikes upon another tendency of man as a husband to relish a ‘privilege’ of easily moving away from his responsibilities anywhere and anytime in life. After Gopal’s desertion, initially Sumi tries to find out the reason why Gopal left her and the children. She also doubts herself as a possible reason of Gopal’s departure. She tries to recollect her past interactions with Gopal so as to somehow reach to some faint motive and situation which might have led to the painful incident. Indeed, it seems painful to her because the people of society would view it as desertion and rejection of a woman by her husband. Society establishes and highlights in a way the existence of vacuum in her life. She feels herself drifting in the boundless world.

Sumi, in fact, represents a phase of transition from tradition towards innovation and modern attitude. Up to this point of time and stage, Sumi invariably behaves like her silently suffering

mother Kalyani. But here comes the first stage of difference between the previous and the next generation of woman. This second generation of the family i.e. Sumi tries to utilize her emotions in a constructive way. She seeks to give direction and meaning to her drifting and seemingly directionless life. She tries to colour with her creativity the hollowness encompassing her life after Gopal's desertion; she feels a sense of belongingness to art and creativity. A striking instance of her creativity is the play 'The Gardener's Son' written for the school function. She ponders "if we are to construct a world, why not shape one with the hopelessness left out, why not end with the hope of happiness..."(Deshpande 158) Thus, she has begun to see and stress the positive aspects of life. This rediscovering and regeneration of herself, this realization of her new identity are the landmarks of the development of a woman in a transitional phase. Now she appears as a foil to her mother Kalyani who had been passively enduring the misery and the agony of desertion. To quote Simone de Beauvoir: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine" (The Second Sex, 267).

Shashi Deshpande suggests in an indirect manner that love and dependency should not be mingled together. After Gopal's desertion, what helped Sumi overcome the unpleasant situation was her self-dependency, self-worth, self-esteem and confidence. It was only on the basis of these virtues that Sumi's happiness revives. She now no longer wishes to be idle, she has got the key to steer her life herself. She desires to be active and busy. Thus, the novelist commits herself to the cause of women welfare, development and empowerment. Education, awareness, courage, economic independence through employment, fortitude, faith in oneself and mental strength are some of the requisites for survival in today's world and the novelist amply stresses on the significance of the inculcation of such attributes for a woman.

The novelist portrays the growth of Sumi's personality as exemplified in her changed, for the better, thinking. She desires to write a play about Surpankha from a new perspective: "Female sexuality, we're ashamed of owning it. We can't speak of it, not even to our own selves. But Surpanakha was not, she spoke of her desires... It is this Surpanakha I am going to write about."(Deshpande 191) This radical analysis and view about Surpankha establishes the change wrought upon Sumi's mind and soul. Thus, Sumi represents the transitional phase in the course of development of capabilities of woman. Shashi Deshpande presents women as

particularly engaged in “the process of redefining and rediscovering their own rules, position and relationships within their given social world.”(Masal 145)

A further development of the capabilities of woman is manifested in the person of Arundhati, Sumi's daughter, who has been witnessing right from her childhood the pathetic and distressful condition of Sumi and Kalyani. The novelist, in fact, presents Arundhati as representative of some of the traits of modern woman, possessing confidence, self-worth courage in adversity, boldness, self-dependent attitude and self-esteem and ready to face the world, by all means. As N.B.Masal avers: “In presenting women's point of view Deshpande is mainly interested in the clash of tradition and modernity, as reflected in the generation gap and conflict between women. Her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values.”(Masal 146) Arundhati is rebellious by nature, violating the outdated customs and orthodox norms of the society. She nurtures a great resentment towards men who compel women to lead a life full of misery and grief and who impose upon them their own will and brute desires. Gopal's desertion of his wife and children, according to Arundhati, is not just a tragedy it is both “a shame and disgrace.”(Deshpande 13)

Arundhati is not at all bothered about the criticism of society in any way. Full of resentment owing to the disintegration of the family, Arundhati approaches her father and boldly asks him why he left them, what the reason was and how he could shy away from his responsibilities of a husband and a father, why he got married at all and why he had children. Facing such pricking questions from his own daughter, Gopal is forced to again brood over his past decisions, motives and philosophy of life. He feels sympathetic towards his daughter but this is not what Aru needs and desires. She is a woman of courage and determination. She is well capable of thinking beyond futile emotions and tears. She firmly says, “He can't get away like this! He has to give us maintenance.”(Deshpande 61) Thus she thinks in terms of reason, logic and practical issues.

Pained to see and feel the predicament of Kalyani and Sumi, Arundhati does not think highly of the institution of marriage. The lopsided relationship of a husband and a wife does not appeal her. She is full of indignation and hostility towards the indifferent and dominating men. “Marriage, in India is considered to be the most coveted relationship, does not have a place in Aru's scheme of things.”(Dubey 90) Rejecting the traditions, customs and rituals of the orthodox society, she is bold enough to declare: “I am never going to get married.”(Deshpande 67) Elsewhere, she again expresses her strong her views regarding this

relationship between man and woman: "I've been thinking about marriage a great deal... whats there in it? I mean, look at Amma and now Sumi... what do you get out of it?... And look at GodaAiji and Bhauji Kaka... they're always scrapping."(Deshpande 138)

Indeed, unlike the silently suffering Kalyani and compromising Sumi, Arundhati is confident, courageous, well determined, aware of her rights, strength and capabilities. The way she copes with the situation after the sudden death of her mother Sumi and grandfather Shripati, shows her fortitude and her development as an individual. Even at this critical stage, she controls herself and says to her 'sympathetic' father: "Yes papa, yes go. Will be all right, will be quite all right, don't worry about us."(Deshpande 246) Thus Arundhati represents the empowered being who is a symbol of modern Indian woman. She is a personification of the development of the capabilities of women achieved through a long struggle and journey right from the orthodox tradition through transition to modernity.

Shashi Deshpande, through her works of fiction, rendered her great contribution to the literature of commitment. Undoubtedly, she is committed to the cause of the development and welfare of women through education, social and economic independence and awareness. In her works she portrays realism. In her novels, we come across the realistic characters caught in life-like situations and problems. However, her area of interest is not confined only to the depiction of the state of society, she also suggests the key to growth and development of women. Shashi Deshpande, gives vent to her views on womanhood through the statement of Indu in *Roots and Shadows* (1983). "This is my real sorrow that I can never be complete in myself" (34).

She shows through her works how does a character, specifically female character, undergoes adverse circumstances and eventually attains strength, courage and self-dependence. She also traces the development of the character, personality and individuality of woman in middle class society affecting the role and status of such woman.

In 'A Matter of Time' Shashi Deshpande has underlined, in no uncertain terms, the development of the capabilities of woman moving from tradition, through transition to modernity. Commenting on Shashi Deshpande's contribution to literature of commitment, a critic observes, "Basically she writes about the situation of women... in the fast-changing socio-economic milieu of India. She writes about the conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to women in the middle-class society."(Masal 143)

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