

From Subjugation To Self-Determination: The Story Of Sumi

Dr Pawel Veliventi¹, Dr U Madhavaiah²,
Prof. Mantri Venkata Raghuram³

¹Associate Professor, Vasireddy Venkatadri Institute of
Technology, Nambur, A.P, India.

²Associate Professor & TPO, Vasireddy Venkatadri Institute of
Technology, Nambur, A.P, India.

³Dean-Placements, Vasireddy Venkatadri Institute of
Technology, Nambur, A.P, India.

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande focuses on the problems faced by middle-class women and their quest for identity in *A Matter of Time*. The novel, like her other novels, explores female subjugation. Sumi is the victim of patriarchal oppression. She is deserted by her husband, but she courageously comes out of desolation. She breaks the shackles of patriarchy and achieves self-sufficiency. Sumi is completely different from the earlier protagonists of Shashi Deshpande like Indu, Sarita, and Jaya. She does not reunite with her husband like the other protagonists. She moves in her own way and takes family responsibilities into her hands. She gives much importance to the role of mother rather than a wife. As a mother Sumi evolves from desertion and helps her teenage children Aru, Charu and Seema to come to their lives as before. Shashi Deshpande's earlier protagonists get refuge in their parental homes for gaining confidence but Sumi decides to face the situation alone after being deserted by her husband. At the age of forty, she starts a new journey for her children, gradually asserts and fulfills her life with her hidden talents. Her husband leaves her after twenty three years of married life, but she faces the situation boldly and evolves as a self-reliable woman. Shashi Deshpande explores through the character of Sumi how a woman can be self-reliant in her life despite the odd situations that prevailed in society.

Key Words: female subjugation, self-reliance, desertion, middle class women, self-determination, talent

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande is an outstanding novelist of the contemporary times. She effectively uses the genre of novel to give a voice to the concerns of the modern woman. She has produced a wonderful corpus of ten novels and four short-story collections. Her feminine sensibilities have given a great psychological depth to her works. Her works are renowned for sensitive and realistic portrayal of the Indian middle class women.

In *A Matter of Time* (1996) the female protagonist Sumi faces disillusionment in her life and it leads to her self-exploration. The novel mirrors the dilemmas of a woman balancing her familial and social identity. The protagonist Sumi is shown as an embodiment of love and affection; hope and patience. Miralini Sebastian maintains, "Woman occupies a central place in Shashi Deshpande's novels. The novelist presents a subtle analysis of conflicting phases, underlying reasons and some extent, to suggest a way out of it. It becomes more interesting to analyze the image of woman in the novels when it is portrayed by a woman." (p.15) These words aptly suit *A Matter of Time*.

Every human being craves for her identity and tries to assert herself. But the patriarchal society denies the women their identity and tries to subjugate them. Their autonomy is curbed and women are instructed to be reliant on their male counterpart. Manusmriti exhorts that a woman should be dependent on her father in childhood, her husband in her youth and her sons in old age and a woman is never fit for independence. Shashi Deshpande, through the characters of different generations, demonstrates that the women resist such archaic laws and they strive for autonomy.

Sumi (Sumitra), the protagonist of the novel, is different from the other Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists. While the other protagonists are working women, she is a housewife. But just like the other protagonists, she is a typical middle class woman who is caught in dilemmas between tradition and desire to assert her identity. She finally decides to come out of her comfort zone and assert her identity both in the family and the society. Through the character of Sumi, Deshpande depicts the stark realities exposing the conditions of women in the Indian society and the subjugation they face in the hands of their husbands.

Shashi Deshpande very effectively uses epigraphs in her novels to drive her point home. They underline the main theme she wants to convey through her work. The same is true in the case of *A Matter of Time*. It reads like this:

'Maitreyi,' said Yajnavalkya, 'verily I
am about to go forth from this

State (of householder).’ (p.1)

This is taken from Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad. It shows the desire of Yajnavalkya to give up his Grishastha (household) dharma and take up Sanyasa (sainthood) dharma. In Vedic times there was a convention of married men renouncing the family responsibilities and living like ascetics. It was considered as a path to salvation. But what happens to the wife and children after the husband suddenly leaves the family is a matter of interest to Shahsi Deshpande. Gopal, the husband of Sumi, is a professor. After twenty three years of marital life, he abruptly announces his decision to leave the family responsibilities. He just wants to give up the burden of his wife and three children Aru, Charu and Seema. He announces his decision very casually while Sumi is watching a song on TV. He does not bother even to give an explanation for his decision. Sumi is so totally bewildered at the announcement that she cannot even respond. She recollects, “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.” (p.27) Her husband is insensitive to assign the responsibility of breaking this news to their daughters. The author mentions,

....then does she get out of bed, wash, make tea for all of them and go into her daughter’s room to tell them what has happened. And now the thought comes to her-he could have spared me this, he could have spoken to them himself. But she does not draw back from what she has to do; she tells them about it, almost exactly repeating Gopal’s words, leaving out nothing. (p.9)

Sumi loves Gopal and marries him. Like the other married couples in Deshpande’s novels, they enjoy a happy and compatible life only for a few years. Though Gopal is not evil in character, he is hesitant in maintaining committed relations. He has that wavering mind right from the beginning of their relationship. While Sumi bravely leaves her paternal home to marry Gopal whom she has loved, he wants to accept her, but is worried if he can carry the burden of relationship. He confesses,

...I married Sumi. And I knew I was right, it was my body that told me this truth. I never had any doubts about my feelings for her. The night she came to my room, I told her to go back home, but the thought of her going away had been like death. (p.67)

Even after marriage, he has apprehensions about relations. He feels, “Marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes- a lifetime of commitment- is not possible for all of us.” (p.69) Finally, with such existential dilemmas, he decides to leave the family.

Only circumstances can prove the resilience and fortitude of a woman. The way Suma adeptly handles life after Gopal's desertion illustrates how strong a woman can be in times of adversity. Dr. Prasanna Sree mentions, Gopal's desertion makes her experience the trauma of a deserted wife and anguish of an isolated partner. All the agonies of life corner her at the age of forty and make her stand alone and helpless along with her teenage daughters Anu, Charu and Seema. Generally, on being deserted, a woman seems to be emotionally shattered. But Sumi is not emotionally broken. On the other hand, like any responsible mother, Sumi helps her children to get on with their lives as before. (pp.107-8)

Her daughters are surprised to find their mother leading a normal life. In fact, she pretends normalcy so as not to disturb her teenage daughters emotionally. The author notes, "in fact, after that first morning when she spoke to them about it, she has not mentioned Gopal's name; nor, when they speak of him, does she show either distress or anger." (p.11) Her husband has left the family suddenly ignoring the daughters who are in the formative years of life. Sumi decides to take care of her daughters more thereby making up for the lack of father's support. She takes the family responsibilities into her hands. She does not wail for the loss of her role of wife, but takes up the challenge of being a successful mother.

In all the novels of Shashi Deshpande, the quest of women for their identity can be seen. Vanamala Viswanathan maintains, "The urge to find oneself, to create space to grow on one's own— that seems to be [Deshpande's] major occupation. Personally I think that's every woman's problem as well. That's where [Deshpande has] touched a chord, I think." (p.12) Scarcely are the Indian women given time and freedom to think of their innate abilities and determine their future. The desertion of her husband gives both time and freedom to Sumi and she utilizes them to the fullest. She creates a space and identity of her own. Desertion by husbands emotionally shatters the traditional Indian women. Though emotionally disturbed, Sumi embarks on a journey towards self-determination. She does not want to be a dependent crippled creature. She decides to get used to living alone after Gopal's desertion. She tries to cope with life in every possible way. With determined frame of mind and resolute approach, she creates space for herself to develop. Thus she deconstructs the construct of patriarchy. Dr. Prasanna Sree compares Sumi to the characters created by Nobel laureate Doris Lessing. She points out, Though deserted by her husband for no fault of hers, Sumi learns to pick up the threads of her life. Like Doris Lessing's characters-Mary Turner, Molly, Ella, Marion and Anna of *The Golden Notebook*, and Martha and Maisie of *A Ripple from the Storm*, who opt to be independent and want

to seek their identity and individuality in their own way, Sumi too wants to fight her own battle and assert her individuality. (p.108)

Sumi is a woman of self-respect and this is evident from the way she deals with Gopal after his insensitive desertion. She does not create fuss over the issue like her mother or develops grudge towards Gopal like her daughters. She knows that "the reason lies inside him, the reason is him." (p.24) She does not blame her husband as she understands that the inability to maintain sustained relations is his inherent character. Sumi represents the feminism of the novelist, which is not the militant kind that sees man as the cause of all the hardships of women. The novelist's depiction of man-woman incompatibility is authentic, realistic and credible. Sumi does not even bother to know the whereabouts of her husband after he has left home. Rather, she picks up the threads of life though emotionally shattered. She starts a new journey for the sake of her daughters, discovers the latent talents in her and asserts herself. She astonishes everyone, including her mother and daughters, with her new found purpose and vigour of life.

Shashi Deshpande does not confine herself to a single generation of women in the novel. She traces the evolution of man-woman relationship through four generations. The plot of the novel covers women of different generations of the same family- Manorama, her daughter Kalyani, Kalyani's daughter Sumi and Sumi's three daughters. The first two generations lead a suffocating life with impregnable silence while the third and fourth generations fight it out. They surmount the impediments on their ways and cope with life in different ways. Manoramabai, Sumi's grandmother, is from a poor Brahmin family and she is married to Vithal Rao who is from an elite family. Manorama is constantly worried that she will be blamed and divorced by her husband as she has not given birth to a male child. Kalyani has a tragic life. She does not enjoy cordial relations with her mother Manoramabai. The bitter mother-daughter relationship is a recurrent theme in Deshpande's novels. Manorama feels Kalyani as a liability as she is a girl child. She hates Kalyani more as she has given birth to girls. The novelist observes,for Manorama, she became the visible symbol of their failure to have a son. And then, she fulfilled none of the dreams Manorama had for her daughter. Her daughter, she had thought, would be beautiful, accomplished, she would make a brilliant marriage that would be Manorama's triumph, that would show them, the family, all those women who had treated Manorama, the daughter of a poor man from a village, with such contempt. Instead, there was Kalyani, who could do nothing that pleased her mother. (p.151)

Kalyani is a great disappointment to her mother as she is neither smart nor beautiful. Kalyani candidly admits, "She was disappointed in me...she expected me to be like her, but I was too timid, too dull...." (p.149) On the pretext of her daughter receiving an anonymous love letter, Manorama has stopped her daughter's education and arranges her marriage with Shripati. Though Kalyani is blamed for no fault of hers, she cannot resist the intentions of her mother. Kalyani has an odd and uneasy relationship with her husband. Kalyani is a very submissive woman and her husband is domineering. To his dismay, she has given birth to two daughters. Later she gives birth to a son, but unfortunately loses him in the crowd in a railway station. Shripati is mad with anger and punishes his wife by stopping talking to her for the next thirty five years. Like Gopal, Shripati also shrinks from the responsibility of sharing love with his daughters. But Kalyani silently accepts the fate. Despite the callousness of her husband, Kalyani has not lost the vigour and zest for life. She does not overtly support her daughters, but provides them the necessary support. While Manorama is very hostile and cannot even sympathise with her daughter, Kalyani empathises with her daughter. It is evident when she provides emotional comfort to Sumi who is deserted by her husband. She even tries to bring reconciliation between them. She proves how a woman can be an anchor to the family despite her own hardship. Suvarna Shinde observes, Since the day, their only mentally-retarded son Madhav, was lost from the railway platform, Shripati has inflicted silence as 'a weapon and a punishment' on Kalyani, and she has endured it silently. Yet she is able to surround others by love, caring, joy, warmth and happiness. Kalyani is the anchor of 'Big House' and is the invisible support for Sumi, a keen observer and a close friend to Aru, a kind grandma to Seema and an ally to Charu. (p.133)

In the engaging novel the author also shows the change that has come in the attitude and mindset of women as time progresses. Sumi never questions her father Shripati who punishes Kalyani for no fault of hers whereas Sumi's daughter Aru acts proactively when her mother is deserted by Gopal. She tries to relocate their relationship. She advises her mother not to take the separation for granted. Though Sumi is stoic about Gopal's desertion, her daughters cannot accept the insensitive act. They fight against the sudden tragic turn of their lives. As 'new women' with radical ideas, they boldly question their father.

While Aru is radical, Sumi is a realist. Instead of blaming her husband or circumstances, Sumi undertakes her journey towards autonomy. She does not create a mess out of her situation. She even does not want others to show their sympathy. Siddhartha Sharma points out, "She doesn't rave and rant, sheds no tears and doesn't hanker after sympathy

from the relations. Sumi proves that she is made of different stuff as she harbours no grudge against Gopal by setting completely free to pursue his own purposes.” (p.59)

Sumi's self-respect does not allow her to seek monetary help from anyone. She asserts her autonomy in every possible way. She enjoys the process of self-reliance. Shashi Deshpande says, “Now, like a stunned bird coming back to life, there is a frenzy of movement, a tremendous flurry of activity, a frenetic shaking of feathers. Sumi cannot be still.” (p.28) She tries to cope with the situation in the best possible way. She takes up a temporary job as a teacher in a school. She learns to ride a two-wheeler with the help of their tenant Prasad and her daughter Aru. She creates space for herself to grow. To the surprise of her children, she exhibits her resourcefulness by writing a play for children titled ‘The Gardener's Son’. She gets appreciation from the school authorities. She feels self-contented to accomplish something for the first time in life with her own talents. She shares her happiness with her daughter, “Be happy for me, Aru. This is the first thing in my life I think that I've got for myself. I was sure I wouldn't get it, there's my age, it's against me, and I have no experience at all.” (p.230) She gets a job as a teacher of Dramatics course in a residential school in Devgiri. With constant introspection, her self-realization is complete and she acquires necessary courage to be self-reliant. Shashi Deshpande strongly advocates a change and she hints through the women characters of the four generations that Indian women definitely can move towards autonomy thus improving their status in the society.

Conclusion

Deshpande focuses on the anguish, disappointment and dilemmas faced by a woman deserted by a man for his own reasons. Sumi is more matured and confident than the other protagonists of Deshpande. Marriage generally tries to subjugate women. Sumi tries to carve a niche for herself outside the institution of marriage. She also provides support to the other female members of the family. She breaks the traditional stereotypes that the woman can survive only with the support of the men. Thus the novel primarily deals with how a woman has moved towards achieving self-determination in the patriarchal society. The novelist hints that the submission of women is no longer possible in the society and the inevitable change is only a matter of time.

References

- Deshpande, Shashi. *A Matter of Time*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1996.
..... “A Woman's World...All the Way!” Interviewed by Vanamala Viswanathan.
Literature Alive. 1.3 (1987). Print.

Sebastian, Miralini. *The Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Post Colonial Argument*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000.

Sharma, Siddhartha. *Shashi Deshpande's Novels: A Feminist Study*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2005.

Shinde, Suvarna. "Quest for Freedom: A Study of Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God* and Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*". *Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande*. Ed. Suman Bala. Khosla Publishing House, New Delhi, 2018, pp. 127-135.

Sree, Prasanna. S. *Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande: A Study*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2003.