



## **Suffering as a Tool of Self Realisation in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time***

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Suffering is an unavoidable thing in human life. It is common to all genders irrespective of caste, colour, region or religion. Shashi Deshpande, being an Indian woman writer, tries to focus on the sufferings of women in their domestic life. Sumi, who is brought up in a traditional background, is deserted by her husband with three teen age daughters. Instead of grieving over the struggle in marriage life, she analyses herself and identifies her inner self. This paper presents the optimistic life of Sumi in *A Matter of Time*.

Women are projected as a secondary human being in the patriarchal society. The segregation of women regarding sex in no way makes her submissive to men. Women excel men in all fields of life. Yet, they are deprived of certain liberties, rights, and privileges by the tradition, culture, and society. This often makes women to surrender and suffer for their survival in the domestic environment. This makes the women writers, bring to light, the unheard voices of women in their fictional works. Shashi Deshpande is one among such writers who concentrates on women as an individual human and shows their physical and mental ailments.

Shashi Deshpande's women are middle class. With this she not only presents the sufferings of women but also tries to suggest certain ways and means to come out of the clutches. This makes her characters to break the tradition when it becomes a hindrance for their happy family life. Women of Deshpande are bold enough to overcome the sufferings either by non-violence or by breaking the traditions and rules set aside solely for them. Their protest is only on the unequal distribution of rules for they regard and respect tradition and culture of the society.

Women strive hard to preserve their identity not only as women but also as human beings. Margaret Walters opines that: "...woman was made for man, yet in another and higher she was also made for herself"(42). Reading the novels of Shashi Deshpande leaves no doubt about the creation of genuine concern for women. Her protagonists are acutely aware of their suppressed and fettered

existence in an orthodox male-dominated society. The women characters have two phases of life after marriage too. They hide their sufferings in order to safeguard the fame and name of the family on one hand, whereas, on the other hand, they become suffocated from which they seek a place to breathe free.

Sufferings of women may be natural or created. The word suffering means both physical and mental pain. *A Matter of Time* brings out the sufferings of Sumi, her daughters Aru, Charu, and Seema and. All women suffer in one way or other. Women are bound between their family and society. *A Matter of Time* presents the women belonging to the Indian middle class family, brought up in a traditional environment. They struggle to free themselves from social conventions and seek their self-identity and independence. Shashi Deshpande gives minute details of the development of girl child. She has dealt a series of girl children, who face, different problems within the family.

*A Matter of Time* questions the existence of women. Through self examination and self searching, women can quickly recover from difficulties and change the situation from despair to hope. The novel revolves round the life of an urban, middle-class family of Gopal and Sumi along with their three daughters, Aru, Charu, and Seema. At the age of forty, she stands alone with her three teen aged daughters. Gopal works as a professor. He walks out of his family for reasons even he cannot pronounce or express clearly. But he says that he leaves for the welfare and upliftment of the family. Sumi is unable to respond. The daughters are astonished and hope that their father would reach home soon.

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, make it possible for them to think – 'it was only a quarrel'; it makes it possible for them to hope – 'he will come back'. When she returns home in the evening, Aru looks around quickly, eagerly, for some sign that he has returned; but nothing has changed since the morning. (10)

Sumi returns with her daughters to the big house of her parents, Kalyani and Shripati. Sumi tries to analyse herself in her return. Kaur, points out the search of identity as: "The quest of individual identity is marked by the conflict between the inner and outer selves of the protagonists. The protagonists urge to be free marks this quest for self-realization" (49). Kalyani lives in suffering for nearly thirty-five years in total silence with her husband. It is a punishment for losing their son, a male heir. Shripati fails to understand and recognize the grief of losing his son for it is not a personal loss to him alone but of Kalyani's as well. Shripati limits himself to the four walls of his room, refuses and withdraws all his responsibilities as a male member of the family. Kalyani builds her own cocoon, having Goda, Sumi, and Premi and their families around her:

For a married woman, her home becomes a 'prison –house'. The house itself, as well as everything in it, belongs to the husband, and if all fixtures the most object is his breeding machine, the wife'. Married women are in fact slaves, their situation no better than that of Negroes in the West Indies'. Mothers are denied rights..., and most are treated like 'any other upper servant'. (Walter 44)

Returning to their parents' home, fighting with their husband, is considered as a sin in the traditional Indian society. Sumi wants to fight her own battle and assert her individuality. Though deserted, Sumi does not contemplate a divorce. Divorce frees a woman legally but the memories

attached to the marriage cannot be erased easily. Further, divorce attacks women and the society does not allow her to be free and happy. Sumi could not express her emotions because of the endless sufferings of her life.

“Unlike any other in her place, Sumi doesnot seek any explanation from Gopal though it is she who bears all the disgrace and humiliation. She knows well that there is no external reason”(Sree iii).

Kalyani decides to make an emotional request to Gopal and plead him to return home. Gopal calmly replies that Sumi is not responsible for his decision and at the same time he is not ready to offer any other reason. Sumi tries to come to terms with the hard, painful reality and expects the same emotional relaxation from her daughters. Sumi is made to suffer not for her fault. She manages to keep her emotions secret but it is difficult to come to terms with the situation.

It was painful for Manorama to see the man Vithalrao had become. She had enthroned her husband, put him up on a pedestal; it did not matter to her that he did not want to be there. She never realized that he laughed self-deprecatingly at the position he was forced to occupy by his wife. His collapse into a broken, suffering human being was hard for her to sake. His tears-and cried a great deal- horrified her. (152)

Gopal’s desertion is not just a tragedy but a shame and a disgrace. Women suffer and control their feelings by all possible means just to keep their marriage going smoothly. Indeed, marriage decides the position of women in the society. Sumi opines:

... her kumkum is in fact and she can move in the company of women with the pride of a wife. Sumi remembers now what she had heard once, that it is prostitutes who are invited to thread of bride’s black beads, because a prostitute can never become that inauspicious thing – a widow. A prostitute is never a wife, yet she is eternally every man’s wife. Clever convoluted thinking, twisted logic, but right, if you believe in the first premise – that to have a husband living is everything. (167)

Gopal’s desertion causes a great emotional imbalance among Sumi’s mother, sister, and cousin. Only at this moment Sumi realizes her inner strength and self respecting character. This self respecting nature makes her to take up a temporary teaching job to provide for herself and her daughters. Sree describes the meeting of Sumi with Gopal as: “At the age of forty, Sumi starts her life afresh. She gets an appointment in a school and wants to go there with Seema, her daughter, she meets Gopal to inform this, recalls and shares a memory and departs on the note of laughter”(118).

Contrary to other central women characters of Shashi Deshpande, Sumi comes out of the sufferings and strives hard to achieve her goal. Prasanna Sree opines that the desertion of Gopal actually becomes an eye-opener for self realisation. “Gopal’s desertion upsets everyone in the family, more so his wife, Sumi. But surprisingly, his departure has brought out her real hidden strength”(Sree 113). Her confidence and courage helps her to skillfully tackle the problems on her way. She is able to regain her strength and have a complete control over her emotions.

Sumi dies when she takes up a job to support herself and her daughters. The optimistic view of Sree on Sumi is: “Had she lived, she would have certainly become an economically independent women, with modern and matured outlook towards life and, at the same time, a loving and responsible mother”(Sree118).

The sufferings of a woman mould her into a new woman with new understanding and consciousness and all is set to begin her life confidently. Thus, Sumi's life reveals the truth that pitying or mourning over the problems will never be a solution. Self examination and self analysis would help to change the situation from despair to hope, and lead a peaceful life.

### Works Cited

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