

A Study of Identical Crisis over Generations in Shashi Deshpande's A Matter of Times
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Abstract

Imagine a situation when you are standing in front of the mirror and you are not able to see yourself. How will one react at this situation? When all you can see is someone's wife, someone's sister or a mother. When the image in the mirror whispers back to you that you don't belong and that you must retreat. This is the actual situation of woman in our current society. Women are wrapped and crippled by the fears of financial and emotional dependency on a male. A woman in our society is a victim of identity crisis in her own home and when she goes out of the jurisdiction of her home, the society forces her to retaliate. A girl is born with equal rights and abilities as a boy, but our society strips her of her potential and robs her identity as an individual. Women rely on their husbands for support, let it be physical, emotional or financial and they seek comfort in the authority of a man. A woman is supposed to be a good daughter, an ideal wife, a loving mother and somewhere being all this she forgets to be herself.

In the present paper, I have made an attempt to study this situation of identity crisis through the female characters depicted in the novel 'A Matter of Times' by Shashi Deshpande.

Keywords: *identical crisis, generation gap, Marriage, relationships.*

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Introduction

Shashi Deshpande's novel '*A Matter of Times*' published in 1996 describes a plot that highlights the intermixed complexities of relationships through the looking glass of time. The pivotal theme in the novel is the quest for self or one's immortal battle to reflect his identity as an individual. The novel presents to us a tale of suffering and endurance through the predicament of three strong women who in a manner can be viewed as the pioneers of three successive generations.

Shashi Deshpande is viewed as a feminist writer as her works usually emphasize on the modern Indian woman's struggle and her attempts to search and hence assert her place and identity on a patriarchal society that is yet conflicted on the ideologies of tradition and modernity. The novel portrays how this eternal conflict has managed the modern woman to feel torn between the contrasting and constant demands of the society and her aspirations of freedom and equality. Though the theme of feminism is profound in the writings of Shashi Deshpande, but her writing abilities are not confined and rather represent a broader aspect into her deep psychological insights and understandings to explore human relationships.

In *A Matter Of Times*, Deshpande sensitively highlights the theme of quest for identity through the lives, personalities, and choices of the characters portrayed in the novel. The novel is also engulfed by the ideas of existentialism by putting forward the understanding of identity, destiny and human will along with the motive of existence. Deshpande unlike other feminist authors pictures a woman's world that is authentic, realistic and credible, and her novels proclaim this aspect. In the current novel Deshpande is trying to present a culmination of the dilemmas faced by the modern woman as a part of her everyday struggle. The novel presents the travails and reassurances in the life of an urban middle class woman, who is progressive yet traditional. The plot primarily deals with the identical crisis that somehow incubates the life of every modern woman of this era.

The first generation of woman is represented by Manorama in the novel, Manorama is characterized as a traditional Indian lady who upholds the conventional lady-like values. She comes from a very humble background when compared to her husband, Vithal Rao. She secludes herself from her family post marriage, by cutting off all connections with them. She thus represents the financial insecurities that prevails in the life of a woman. Manorama seeks her fulfilment as a woman in her ability to bear a son for her husband. She is compelled by the constant fear that her husband might marry again and that she has failed to beget him a son, a male heir of the family. Her constant insecurities, financial as well as existential compelled her to

push her daughter Kalyani into an early and unsuccessful marriage. Manorama though cuts off all ties with her family; but she maintains a relationship with her youngest brother, who had been deprived of motherly affections since a very young age.

The novel talks about woman's emancipation and Shashi Deshpande's views on woman emancipation.

'.. Manorama wanted a son, instead there was Kalyani, not an unloved child, no never that. But for Manorama, she became the visible symbol of their failure to have a son' (A Matter Of Times, 150-151)

Manorama makes strenuous though unsuccessful attempts to groom her daughter into a successful marriage with her own brother, Shripati so as to secure the property within the family.

Kalyani, Manorama's daughter, represents the second generation of woman in the novel. The character of Kalyani represents a woman endowed with deep resilience and strength. **'...but Kalyani was never embarrassed by his tears. She gently wiped them away as if he was a younger sibling, patted his hand and sat silently by his side until he recovered..'** (A Matter of Times, 152)

Manorama viewed Kalyani as her soul enemy and somehow blamed her for all her sufferings including the sad demise of her husband. **' You are my enemy, you were born to make my life miserable..'** (Manorama to Kalyani, A Matter of Times, 153) Manorama wanted to **'punish her by keeping her away from her father'**(152). Manorama's identity as Vithal Tao's wife gave her a sense of comfort and security. She didn't wanted to be seen as a widow as that would strip her of her entire identity.

Kalyani and her husband, Shripati have a very complexed relationship. Shripati is described in the novel as **' The man on the other hand is stern, his eyes hooded, arms folded across his chest in the usual 'manly pose' demanded by the photographers for such pictures. 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, sitting by him, his wife'** (A Matter Of Times, 26). Kalyani's married life is yet another tragedy. She loses her mentally unsound and only son at V.T. station while coming back from Bangalore, which not only subjected her as a victim of her husband's rage but a victim if her own guilt as well. Shripati's anger knows no boundaries the moment he realized the enormity of losing the only male heir of the family. He searches consecutively for two months, he lefts no stone unturned and no door unknocked and searches **'like a madman'** (Pg. 140). He is portrayed to be deemed by an iota of hope but all this hope fades to dust when he is

dejected by himself and *'he never found him..'* (Pg. 140). Shripati unable to find his only son, puts the blame on poor Kalyani and punishes her by cutting off all forms of communication with her. He locks himself up in a room that is a symbolism of his own claustrophobic space that dwells in his mind. For thirty seven long years, there is no communication between Shripati and Kalyani. The relationship is so ruined that Kalyani's daughter Sumi is perplexed at the thought of them being together even in a picture. One's imagination cannot justify how one can stop all communication with his wife. He tries to inflict mental pain on Kalyani and even attempts to cut off from her daughters. He even mentioned Kalyani as Manorama and Vithal Rao's daughter in his will, which pertains her hatred for Kalyani and his ardent desire for a male heir. The novel thus presents an actual amalgamation of Indian psyche very realistically and its preference for a male child, Kalyani is a victim of all this.

The third generation of woman is represented by Sumi, who is Kalyani's daughter. Sumi in a sense can be viewed as the protagonist of the novel as the novel is a story of her journey to liberation. Sumi, married to Gopal who is an educated and respected as an elite professor in the society. He unable to achieve the targeted happy and ideal family as defined by the society having *".. father, mother, daughter and son ..."*. Gopal thus renounces his family and thus seeks a withdrawal from his duties due to the constant fear and the pains of worldly ties. The novel thus depicts the life of the family in lurch and how a woman alone has to fend not only for herself but for her children as well. However, even after all these inflictions she chooses not to wither away or to blame herself but rather she is concerned with the process of moving on with life. Gopal when announces the catastrophe for Sumi in a trivial fashion as if it was nothing.

".. The telling of what he has come to say takes him so little time that when he has done, the song is still going on. He looks at her for reaction, but she is gazing at him as expectantly, waiting for him to go on." (*A Matter Of Times*, 8)

Gopal thus waits for a reaction, the kind that is expected from the character of Sumi, maybe the sight of her withering away and crying for him to stop and change his mind, pleading him to stay. Sumi, in fact is shocked; so dumbfounded that she runs out of words completely. Gopal without any significant and apparent reason puts an end to the twenty three years of their relationship. Keerthi Ramachandra says in this regard –

" without the dirt, the smells, the fear and despair of the real thing, but sanitized bacteria free, gopal tells he wants to talk to her and without any

preamble says what he has to”.

Sumi's inner self is shocked, she thinks of the future, tries to imagine one without a husband. Financial insecurities and responsibilities grips her. She sees she has nowhere to go and her mind keeps traveling from one possible clarification to another, but she refuses to accept her life as a tragedy and somewhere consoles her soul and this exhaustion forces her to a deep sleep. Sumi wakes up next morning and her calmness signifies her sheer peace that she has successfully achieved within a night. She is somewhat successful in coming to terms with the harsh reality and accepts that her husband is now gone and may never return. She narrates the happenings of the last night to her daughters. There is no confusion depicted in the scene, no tension in the air rather a calmness fused with infinite patience. Sumi's strong soul that compels her to move on with the flow of life is appreciable in the due course of the novel. The fact that she doesn't even bother about the reasons that has compelled Gopal to desert his wife in the middle of the family liabilities, portrays her ability to accept it as a part of her fate. She even avoids discussions about the well-beings of Gopal as she says “*..what do I say?.... That my husband has left me and I don't know why and maybe he doesn't really know either? And that I am angry and humiliated and confused ...? Let that be, we won't go into it now..*”(*A Matter Of Times, 107*). Sumi cuts off all bonds with her husband at that very moment and thus, refuses all her concern for him weather he is alive or not. Sumi thus proves herself as a truly emancipated woman even better than the other heroines of Shashi Deshpande like Indu, Jaya and Sarita. Sumi does believe in the concept of marriage but she doesn't cling to the idea just for the mere factor of security. She instead believes in asserting her individual identity and thus refuses to be the poor wife who is crying and searching for her gone husband. Sumi is not engulfed with confusion or frustration, despite the fact that she feels lonely and aloof.

The pseudo forth generation in the novel is represented by Aru, the eldest daughter of Sumi. Aru strikes a ray of hope, who has seen everything and is well aware of the fact that there is no particular motive behind her father's deserting them in the middle of the crisis. She no longer blames her mother and sets her mother as a role model instead. She has a better understanding of life and a sense of self identity and believes in asserting herself. Aru is a mature woman who is medium for the emancipation of future generations of women. Through Aru the writer personifies her hope that woman should understand the value of self identity and predicament. Aru assures her father “ *we'll be quite alright, don't worry about us*” (*A Matter Of Times, 246*)

Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande has presented an accurate representation of the struggles a woman has to confront as a part of her everyday life. By means of four generations the writer emphasizes on the fact that there haven't been much advances towards the healing of woman, but with the passage of time, one can say there is still hope, that one day the woman whose existence has been overshadowed by the roles imparted to them by the society, will start asserting themselves, not as someone's wife or daughter but as independent strong ladies. One can notice the drift between the character of Manorama and Sumi. Manorama who knows nothing except to please her husband and Vithal Rao's wife is all she has in the name of her identity, whereas Sumi refuses to cling to her husband and an unsuccessful marriage. The prevalent desire of having a male successor and the wife's responsibility to beget a son is rightly depicted in the novel. Deshpande quotes this preference for a male child as a sum in the quote-

*Whatever wrong has been done by him,
His son frees it from it all.
Therefore he is called a son. By his son
A father stands firm in this world.*

The novel presents a realistic representative of Indian psyche. Our patriarchal system that succumbs the identity of our women

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