

‘Revisiting the Repositories of Memory’: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Abstract: Man basically is born as a seeker. He wanders between the past and the present. In his struggle he relives every past moment. The present paper is an attempt of studying the portrayal of characters in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* (1996) and how the chain of the past memories keeps them bound and help them to define their present identities with the help of past. The novel under study revolves around the evolution of man-woman relationship through four generations. Shashi Deshpande, the well-known Indian Woman Novelist in English explores the characters who try to confront the truth by plunging into the past. Gopal tries to validate his 'self', Aru struggles to understand her mother's 'indifference' to her father's step of 'desertion'. The unveiling of certain déjà vu moments with Gopal directs Sumi to get a closure look of the reasons behind his escapism. The absence of Kalyani's parents, Vithalrao and Manorama too is made felt through Kalyani and Goda's act of retelling myths. The death will of Shripati restores Kalyani's lost dignity. Hence the present paper is a study of how Shashi Deshpande's promotion of the notion of access to the past brings progression in the life of characters.

Keywords: Man-a seeker, past, present, progression, self-validation, truth.

I. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the present study is to critically examine how man basically is born as a seeker and in his journey to the attainment of the truth how dwindles between the past and the present. It in fact is his struggle to signify his 'present being' with the 'past' one. In this process he relives every past moment that causes naturally the revival of the whole past attached to him. However, 'seeking what is true is not seeking what is desirable' that is what Albert Camus says in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*. (www.goodreads.com) The present paper is an attempt of studying the portrayal of characters in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* (1996) and how the chain of the past memories keeps them bound. They try to define their identities in their struggle with the past. Hence Shashi Deshpande adopts the flashback technique to explore the intricacies of the man-woman relationship. The method adopted for study is based on the primary sources like the original texts and secondary sources like criticism, reference materials, internet sources with the topic related discussions.

II. INTRODUCTION TO SHASHI DESHPANDE

Shashi Deshpande, the well-known Indian Woman Novelist in English is at her poignant best in exploring the image of middle class Indian woman who 'slips in and out of different shells' of her life and very courageously confronts the truth. She is the winner of the Padma Shri award in 2009 for her literary achievements in writing few books for children, short stories and more than ten novels. A major aspect of her writings is her presentation of the contemporary Indian society. In spite of the fact that projection of Indian middle class woman is her major concern, her writing does reflect the human side regardless of the gender. That she has been acclaimed the worldwide scholarly attention is rightly in the words of Paul Berry (1975:01) because of 'the glimpses (her) characters offer us, of the self under stress, of the identity in question, of the roles sought and played.' In her attempt of presenting women's primary concern to their family and community, Shashi Deshpande too touches upon the clash between past and the present. It is very well reflected in her novel, *A Matter of Time* as the characters in this novel dwindle between the past and the present. Their momentary shelter in the past educates them in their struggle 'to transcend their restrictive roles' with double energy.

III. A MATTER OF TIME: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

The novel, *A Matter of Time* revolves around the mystery being unravelled behind the 'horrifying story of loss and agony' of the characters. The novel demonstrates the evolution of man-woman relationship through four generations. Manorama and Vithalrao belong to the first generation, Kalyani and Shripati belong to the second, Sumi and Gopal to the third whereas Aru, Charu and Seema belong to the fourth generation. As Shashi Deshpande's novels are always crowded with people, the present novel under study too has neatly knitted a number of females closely together. The wavering narrative technique of the novel offers readers a comprehensive view of the story with its ins and outs. It is a projection of three women, Sumi, her mother-

Kalyani and Kalyani's cousin sister, Goda, who are destined to undergo the traumatic experience of 'desertion' by males in their lives. Aru, the 18-year-old girl, daughter of Sumi struggles to comprehend the destined roles of wives and daughter in case of Goda. The diverse causes behind their deserted state relegate them to the state of isolation. Kalyani is condemned to the 'margins of (*lifelong*) silence' with her husband, Shripati. However, in the end she is left with her 'widowhood'. Sumi is compelled to tolerate the painful silence and return to her parents' house with her three daughters after her husband, Gopal walks out on her for the reasons even he fails to 'articulate', whereas Goda is reduced to the passive being as a reaction to her father's passivity. Aru finally is left as a witness to the perplexing world of husband-wife relationship ended with the death of either of a partner.

IV. GOPAL'S ENCOUNTER WITH PAST

Getting engrossed in the past experiences is the common human tendency. But Shashi Deshpande initiates this human act as one of the strategies to validate one's 'self'. Gopal, who is portrayed as the University Professor in the novel emerges to be dwindling between faith and hope and finally opts for withdrawal from the involvement in life full of duties. In fact, his love, care for his family and validating his self-identity against his family appears to be a kind of contradiction within the assertion. As for instance, he recalls his fatherly connections during 'those hours in the night' with his children and also his filling with an 'emotion' while 'holding the small warm bundles' in his arms. But the truth that he speculates behind the 'magic circle' encompassing 'woman and child' i.e. Sumi and the baby to her breast terminates his connections with them. Consequently, during the period of his exile Gopal jumps into the different theories of the 'truth' and tries to authenticate its existence in the past. He very well justifies his probing into the past in order to articulate his self-deprivation. He shares what Kierkegaard says: 'Life must be lived forwards but it can only be understood backward'. (AMOT, 98)

'Why did you marry?' his daughter, Aru's daunting question forces Gopal in the words of Gerardine Meaney (1993:98) to "wind back" the clock of history perhaps to uncover something undetermined." Even the 'higher truth' as the Rig Veda calls behind his much interrogated decision of walking out on his wife, Sumi he thinks is 'always beyond our grasp that really continues to evade us.' (AMOT, 99) Even though the 'inferior truth' of facts is 'treacherous', Gopal believes that 'people need their myths as much as the facts....' (AMOT, 99) Thus he understands that man's idea of 'oneself' is a sign of his 'complex relationship with the past.' He tries to detect man's complex connection with the past in his acts of 'resisting', 'reliving', 'ignoring' 'recreating' or 'reshaping' it to his desires. He enjoys reliving with Sumi when he finds Sumi in his memory lane with her 'essence' of being 'irradiated', also with his 'worshipping her from head to toe'. It is nothing but the revival of his past 'glimpse of the purest joy' when he says, 'I felt my being drown in hers, I was close to that great mystery, the otherness of myself.' (AMOT, 89) He strongly believes his meeting with Sumi a 'predesigned pattern'. But the same 'pattern' eventually displays the phase of Sumi's motherhood, which Gopal approaches with a feeling of an 'outsider'. 'The life of the body' (that Gopal had revelled in it) has to end. He is agreed with what Camus says, 'The body shrinks from annihilation.' (AMOT, 69) The rehashing past experience perhaps helps him to be assertive in his answer to Aru's questions that- 'Marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes – a lifetime of commitment- is not possible for all of us.' (AMOT, 69) While sharing his perception about Sumi, Gopal blurts out the truth,

'But Sumi's anger is sharp: one clean cut and it's over, ... I was frightened, Aru, frightened of the emptiness within me, I was frightened of what I could do to us, to all of you, with that emptiness inside me.' (AMOT, 50) Hence, in order to protect his family from his stained past he walks out on them. He explains his fear: 'But if I cannot escape my past, how will my children ever be free of me?' (AMOT, 218) Even though what Gopal thinks is right the narrator tells us, 'It's fool's game trying to escape'. (AMOT, 218)

V. ARU'S ENCOUNTER WITH PAST

What mortifies Aru is that despite her attempt she is left 'encompassed by a sense of humiliation' by her father, Gopal. Being a girl with obsessive orderliness, Aru suggests Sumi to seek lawyer and not to let her husband get off 'scot free.' She calls Gopal, 'a callous father' as his 'desertion' veiled with implicit silence intensifies their 'feeling of displacement' and the 'sense of shame and disgrace'. Her determination to search for truth behind her father's silence and mother's 'indifference' forces her to probe into the past. She is confused to understand Gopal, who had captured the idea of family through song in her childhood now lets the whole family face 'the disintegration of it'. (AMOT, 184) Consequently she follows 'the dusty lane of law'. In her discussion with the lawyer, Surekha, she becomes aware of the futility of law in their case. The only option left in her hand is to retrospect and dig out the truth lying on the familial level. She shares her father's past with Surekha but appears to be completely perplexed to understand his writing an article on students' attack on him and his 'retraction' from it:

'I couldn't believe he could do that. If he didn't believe in it, why did he write it" And if he did, how could he say it was all wrong? I was furious, I said terrible things to him, I called him coward and I said – oh, so many things I shouldn't have. And maybe that's why...' (AMOT,206)

Aru goes further with her struggle to understand her mother's 'indifference' to her father's step of 'desertion' even though it was a 'death signal' for her. When she reads Sumi's script, 'The Gardeners' Son', she realizes that she misunderstood Sumi since Gopal left her. The script unfolds Sumi's expression of outspoken thoughts regarding the women's inner desire and predicament. It also kindles her memories about dead Sumi. It is her encounter with Sumi, who had let the 'bygones be bygones'. She reflects,

'I said angry words to her, but I know now that was not true. It's too late now, I can never speak to her, and it's too late.' (AMOT, 240)

The character of Kalyani, can be studied against the authorial belief: 'Clearly, there are stories concealed in the interstices of silence,' 'The dark looming cloud' of the absence of Kalyani's 'edited version' of her past becomes obvious to everyone and even to Aru in a short period of time. Hence, Aru is curious to know the 'queer relationship' of Kalyani and her husband, Shripati maintained by a long silence. Hence, she actively gets engaged with Kalyani and Goda's 'exercise in nostalgia'. Sumi looks upon this Aru's 'new occupation' as her way back to 'family circle'. With her father's 'desertion', Aru develops 'a sense of having lost her footing in the world' where justice rarely prevails. Her encounter with her grandmother, Kalyani's half deserted status 'fills her with indignation, a sense of pity at the enormous waste.' (AMOT 184) She declares her support to Kalyani when she says, 'I'm your daughter, Amma, I'm your son.' (AMOT, 244) The story narrated by Premi lays open the dark and fearful past of Kalyani, a 'hysterical, self-punishing woman.' (AMOT, 185) It acquaints Aru with two different entities in Kalyani and Shripati which is narrated as follows:

'a woman, her two daughters by her side, frozen into an image of endurance and desperation. And a man, moving all over a city, tirelessly searching for his lost son.' (AMOT,244)

VI. SUMI'S ENCOUNTER WITH PAST

'A burden of unsaid things' lay between Sumi and Gopal despite her 'strong, almost overpowering desire to talk to him.' With a feeling of '*déjà vu*', Sumi connects his present room with his room in the outhouse. She does interrogate his 'new' status on the basis of his past. However, she fails to put 'tantalisingly disjointed, bits and pieces of his life together. She thinks the assimilation of his life with the new world around 'spell (s) out the actuality of their separation' She copes with the fact that their 'lives have diverged, they now move separately, two different streams.' (AMOT, 85) In her act of juxtaposition, she acknowledges the 'promise of rebirth' in the fragrance of water and earth mingling' but lacks the same in their relationship. Gopal's failure in following the trail of 'woman and her grief' disappoints Sumi, hence she turns away from the 'confusing maze of justice'. In her interrogation with the reasons behind his withdrawal, she brushes upon one possibility of how Gopal felt 'shut out' in the house of 'females'. The unveiling of certain *déjà vu* moments with Gopal directs Sumi to get a closure look of the reasons behind his escapism. She ascertains that '*the reason is him.*' Hence, she does not allow the opinion of others drown out her own inner voice. She replies to Aru's urge of punishing Gopal, 'Do you want to punish him Aru? I don't. I'm not interested. I just want to get on with my life.' (AMOT, 61) It reminds one what the famous American poet, Adrienne Rich says, 'When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her.' In one of the scenes Gopal and Sumi are seen reshaping their present by sharing their past memories. Sumi initiates, 'Do you remember, Gopal ...? You said that at any time if either of us wanted to be free, the other would let go. ... No handcuffs, you said. And I agreed.' (AMOT,221)

VII. KALYANI'S ENCOUNTER WITH PAST

'Living is done with words and also with silence' that is what famous American poet, Adrienne Rich believes. It is the character of Kalyani in the novel that can be measured by this statement. Kalyani and her cousin sister, Goda are prominently seen authenticating their existence only through their habit of 'reviving and reliving the past.' Most of the time Kalyani plunges into the past with her granddaughter, Aru. It is her attempt to 'refashion her family history out of carefully chosen material. Even though she leaves out 'the dark and discomfoting' from the past we are told the truth that 'we are always giving the past a place in our lives.' (AMOT,100) She measures Sumi's distressed position against her own painful history. While sharing it with Gopal she moans the repetition of history:

My father died worrying about me, my mother couldn't die in peace, she held on to life though she was suffering ... she suffered terribly ... because of me, she didn't want to leave me and go.' (AMOT, 47)

In one's closer analysis one appreciates the transformation in Kalyani with her views on 'life'. She shares it with Aru, 'You can't stop living because someone else has got hurt.' (AMOT,198)

III. VAULTING INTO THE PAST AND PROGRESSION IN THE CHARACTERS

Towards the end of the novel, Kalyani, a partly deserted woman appears to be a strong one as she claims her right to mourn over the death of Shripati, her husband by brooding over the excitatory emotional memories of her earlier marital status. Though, ironical but further the death will of Shripati can be looked upon as restoring Kalyani's lost dignity in the past. It no doubt revives and accentuates her present existence.

The absence of Kalyani's parents, Vithalrao and Manorama too is made felt through Kalyani and Goda's voices carrying the 'ring of people retelling myths' (AMOT, 118) In fact Sumi's 'sense of power of time' has also been developed through churning the ocean of the past. The conjuring up the 'spirits of the dead' deepens her comprehension of the aspect of time. 'Time' she perceives as a creator that can remove all the 'dross' from the past. She no longer believes 'time' depicting itself as 'Kalosmi – 'I am Time risen to destroy the world.' (AMOT,121)

VIII. Conclusion

Thus though 'one exercises his right to exile from one's family or the ways of the world, one does not really avoid the exile from history.' The history that has been described by Gerardine Meaney (1993:98) as the 'agent of determinism' can also be the 'arena of change' according to her. Consequently, Shashi Deshpande's characters appear to be the seekers of that change and the psychological pleasure in their act of retrogression. In fact, it is Shashi Deshpande's remarkable attempt to promote the notion of access to the past in a new light as it brings progression in the life of characters. In her essay, *Resistance Theory/Theorising Resistance or Two Cheers for Nativism*, Benita Parry (1997:84) refers Brian Friel says, in "the 'facts' of history that shape us. ... we must never cease renewing those (*past*) images, because once we do, we fossilize."

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