
THEME OF ALIENATION IN A MATTER OF TIME

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ABSTRACT

In Deshpande's fifth novel, A Matter of Time, the theme of alienation is even more pronounced. The author quotes extensively from the Upanishads to explain the sense of rootlessness and desolation experienced by the protagonist, Gopal, who abandons his wife and three teenaged daughters for some strange, and inexplicable reason. The author also describes the pain and humiliation of Sumi, his wife, who copes with the situation admirably and tries to provide emotional and financial security for her three daughters.

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande, who has carved a niche for herself in articulating the bitterness and desolation of her women characters in her novels, enters for the first time into a broader arena and grapples with the complex theme of alienation in her novel, *A Matter of Time*. Also for the first time in her career, Deshpande makes a man the protagonist of the novel. But this does not mean that the novelist has totally shifted her focus. A close study of the novel reveals that Deshpande is deeply concerned as usual with the traumas suffered by women in a middle-class family in India. No doubt, the novel begins in a manner which is deceptively similar to her earlier novels and follows almost the same pattern, but there is something intrinsically different in its theme and presentation.

The novel revolves around an urban, middle class family of Gopal. It begins with a

crisis leading to an intense introspection by the protagonist. However, the first person narration which served to delve deep into the hearts of the women protagonists in Deshpande's earlier novels, for the first time successfully portrays the inner conflict in a man's mind, though it is sparingly used in parts of the novel. The author who has often provoked a debate about whether or not she is a feminist writer seeks, perhaps, to prove that she is capable of sympathizing with her male protagonists too.

In *A Matter of Time*, Deshpande gives an honest account of the abrupt disintegration of Gopal's happy family and diverse reactions of all the people concerned. The novel deals with a man's mid-life crisis leading to his desire for renunciation. Without any warning, Gopal one day announces to his wife that he is leaving the house for good. Sumi, his wife of twenty years, and their teenaged daughters, Aru, Charu and

Seema are caught totally unawares. Sumi retreats into a shocked silence while eighteen-year-old Aru tries bitterly to search for her own reasons for this calamity.

Deshpande, who is an acknowledged master at expressing the anguish and frustrations of women, gives a true-to-life saga of the trauma faced by Sumi. The support of her immediate family — her parents, sister and cousins — comforts her to some extent, cushioning her against the cruelties of life. Unlike the general idea of a deserted wife, Sumi does not crumble to pieces at the pain and humiliation inflicted on her. As soon as she recovers from the shock, she picks up the threads of her life and tries to readjust her lifestyle to suit the situation. She moves with her children, into her parents' house and helps her children to get on with their lives as before. This monstrous tragedy, so undeserving as we are made to understand, leaves Sumi seemingly unperturbed. But beneath her apparent stoicism is a pathos left for the reader to decipher.

Sumi and Gopal's is not the ordinary arranged marriage. Gopal's frequent recapitulations allow the reader to share in their discovery of each other. Their joyous intimacy leaves one in no doubt of their compatibility—physical as well as mental. Recounting the rapture of their first physical union, Gopal thinks: "And I

knew then that it was for this, this losing yourself in another human being, that men give up their dreams of freedom."¹ Their separation, therefore, is all the more poignant. Premi, Sumi's sister, is filled with a rage "at their carelessness in throwing away what they had, uncaring, it seems to her, of the value of what they have discarded." (136)

As we study the novel closely, it is evident that there are no obvious reasons for Gopal walking out on his family. This is clearly established by the pathetic probing by Kalyani, Sumi's mother, who takes it upon herself to plead with her son-in-law to return home. Gopal reassures her that Sumi is not to be blamed for his decision, but does not offer any other convincing reason. Sumi's sister's attempt to elicit a reply from her brother-in-law also proves to be futile. On probing, Premi discovers from Aru and Charu that their father had been humiliated by his students in the college and had later resigned from his job. However, this does not seem to be a sufficiently concrete reason for his resolution. At times, it appears that even Gopal is not aware of the reasons for this momentous decision he has taken.

Vague references to his past by Gopal reveal that his childhood has not been normal. The fact that his father had married his brother's

widow, and he was born of that union proves to be quite unsettling for Gopal. His adolescent mind draws up several possible reasons for this marriage. And, at one time, struggling with an inner conflict, he even draws a parallel from Hamlet's predicament:

It was when I read Hamlet, fortunately much later, that the most terrible version of my parents' story entered my mind. Just that once, though, for I slammed the door on it immediately. In this story my father became a man succumbing to his passion for his brother's wife, the woman compliant, a pregnancy and a child to come and then after the husband's convenient death

(no, I couldn't I just couldn't make my father poison his brother) a marriage of convenience. (43)

He is never able to relate to his father always thinking of him as his mother's guilty partner. Later, his parents' gruesome death leaves a void in his life. But, more than that, it is the realization, that his sister, Sudha, and he did not share the same father that shatters his equilibrium. As he later reflects, "That was a betrayal that cut away at the foundations of my life." (52) It is obvious, therefore, that Gopal has long been nurturing a sense of loneliness and desolation as is evident from his ruminations:

Emptiness, I realized then, is always, waiting for us. The nightmare we most dread, of waking up among total strangers, is one we can never escape. And so it's a lie, it means nothing, it's just deceiving ourselves

when we say we are not alone. It is the desperation of a drowning person that makes us cling to other humans. All human ties are only a masquerade. Some day, some time, the pretence fails us and we have to face the truth. (52)

This line of thinking, which is similar to Sartrean existentialism, progresses towards the more Indianised concept of renunciation in the later stages of Gopal's life. The Hindu tradition identifies four stages in a man's life: *Bramhacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, Sanyasa*. Having experienced *Bramhacharya* and *Grihastha* (bachelorhood and the duties of a householder), respectively, Gopal now moves forward to experience *Vanaprastha* (the relinquishing of the duties of a householder) which is only a step away from *Sanyasa* (total renunciation).

Apart from a few random recollections of his childhood, Deshpande does not throw any further light on the reasons for Gopal's

renunciation. It is left to the readers to surmise why Gopal chooses to relinquish his duties as a householder. It is not even clear if he has achieved a solution to his problems or has arrived at a greater understanding of himself. It is, however, quite apparent that he has relished every moment of his life as a husband and father. It is this paradox which shrouds the reasons for his behaviour in ambivalence and mystery.

This aspect of the novel, dealing with Gopal's renunciation, finds a parallel in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* where the protagonist, like his namesake Gautama Buddha, abandons his home and family to find a solution to the "enigma of human loneliness and discontent."²

The novel ends on a tragic note with the sudden deaths of Sumi and her father, Shripati, in a road accident. This, perhaps, serves to justify the philosophical strain which runs through the novel. Gopal's answer to Premi's persistent probing underlines the inconsistency of life and the uselessness of living:

You remember the Yaksha's question to Yudhishtira: What is the greatest wonder in the world? And what Yudhishtira's

answer was? We see so many people die yet we go on living as if we are going to live forever. Yes, it's true, that is the greatest marvel the world holds, it's the miracle. In fact, it's the secret of life itself. We know it's all there, the pain and suffering, old age, loneliness and death, but we think, somehow we believe that it's not for us. The day we stop believing in this untruth, the day we face the truth that we are mortal, that this is our fate as well, it will become difficult, almost impossible to go on.

And if that happens to all of us, the human race will become extinct. (134)

CONCLUSION

The passage, no doubt, gives "metaphysical probings into the world of the spirit,"³ but the novel contains a lot else which the author tries to convey through the "idea of three women from three generations from the same family and how they respond to the tragedy that suddenly overpowers their lives."⁴

REFERENCES

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- 4 Jha, Subhash K - "Knotty Problems," Sunday, Dec. 22-28,

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