

Subjugation of Women in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

¹**S.Kavitha** M.A., M.Phil.,
Ph.D Scholar (Full-Time), PG and Research Department of English, M.V.Muthiah
Government Arts College (W) Dindigul
²**Dr.K.M.Sumathi** M.A., Ph.D
Research Supervisor and Co-author, Principal (FAC) Government Arts and Science
College, Vendasandur, Dindigul

Paper Received on 08-07-2025, Accepted on 10-08-2025
Published on 10-08-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.3.364

Abstract

A noteworthy Indian woman novelist and author of many children books, Shashi Deshpande has attained a distinctive place in Indian writing in English genre. Deshpande is remarkable for her lucid and simple language. Her writings deal with the predicament of the middle class people who belong to small strata of the society. Shashi Deshpande mainly concerns with the issues of women as she declares that just because of being a woman. Her women characters are the replica of the ordinary people and their problems, chaos, difficulties are as the same as in our Indian patriarchal scenario. Deshpande's protagonists have faced the problems of oppression, suppression, exploitation, marginalization and discrimination through the Indian patriarchal set up and traditional boundaries. Even if they were educated and economically independent, they are also no exception to such social evils. This paper aims to highlight the issues of women, female subjugation and subordination of women in the name of marital life, tradition and culture with reference to Shashi Deshpande's novel *A Matter of Time*.

Key Words: Subjugation, Oppression, Exploitation, Culture, Tradition, Patriarchy and Restriction.

Introduction:

Shashi Deshpande is one of the renowned writers of Indian Writing in English. She has represented a true picture of the social world of many complex relationships in her works. The author has stimulated her characters to undergo a keen self-examination by using such tools like anxiety, doubt and a feeling of void of values. Particularly the women characters are caught in the process of rediscovering and redefining their own position and roles within their personal spaces. Her novels are focused on modern Indian women's quest for self discovery and self actualization. She writes about the conflict between tradition and modernity in relation to women

in middle class society. Her novels also deal with the theme of the quest for female identity and the difficulties of man-woman relationship especially in the context of marriage and the trauma of a disturbed adolescence.

Shashi Deshpande is one among the well-known Indian women novelists, who was born in Dharwad, Karnataka in 1938. Her father was the prominent Sanskrit Scholar and Kannada writer, Adya Rangachar also known as Sriranga. Shashi Deshpande's eminent works include: *Roots and Shadows*, *The Binding Vine*, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *If I Die Today*, *Come Up and Be Dead*, *A Matter of Time*, *That Long Silence*, *Small Remedies*, *Moving On*, *In the Country of Deceit*, *Shadow Play* and *Strangers to Ourselves*. Deshpande's renowned short story collections include: *The Miracle and Other stories*, *The Legacy and other stories*, *It was the Nightingale and Other stories*, *It was dark and Other stories* and *The Intrusion*. Even *The Legacy* is being used as a text book in the Columbia University for the Modern Indian literature. She is also well known and remarkable for her children book collections.

A Matter of Time is an interesting novel published in 1996. The story of the novel sets in Karnataka. It explores the difficulties of relationships within the familial life and encompassing the lives of three generations of women and men. Shashi Deshpande is well versed in handling the main plot, various subplots and ample of women characters. Like wise, this novel is also dealt with three generations of the family and their background. The novel starts with Gopal's desertion to his wife Sumi (Sumitra) and his three daughters Aru (Arundathi), Charu and Seema. When Gopal leaves Sumi for such invalid reasons even, he cannot define the exact reason for the desertion. At the end of the novel, Gopal reveals the reason for his desertion of his family to a lawyer Surekha, he says: "what I'm trying to say is – our journeys are always separate, that's how they're meant to be. If we travel together for a while, that's only a coincidence" (Deshpande 212). It exposes the mismatched life style of the couple.

After Gopal's desertion, Sumi returns her father's home along with her three daughters. While living in that very big house, Sumi's daughters find that their grand parents Shripati and Kalyani, who have not spoken to themselves for the last thirty years. Aru is an eighteen year old young woman, who is the central figure of the novel. She is struggling to understand the intension of her father's desertion and her mother's indifference behaviour. She tries to reunite her parents and find out the mystery behind her grand parents silence. Sumi feels deeply hurt and humiliated for her husband's desertion of the whole family, even at this point also she remains silent. In order to console herself Sumi remember her conversation with Gopal before their marriage that, "At any time if either of us wanted to be free, the other would let go. We are not going to tied together, you said. No handcuffs, you said. And I agreed" (Deshpande 221). On the other side she questions herself that she is

the only reason for this desertion, her daughters may blame her for this pathetic situation. Sumi admits that: "The three of them ranged against me. Am I the enemy? Do my daughters blame me for what Gopal has done? Do they think it is my fault? Why can't I talk to them, tell them what I feel, how it was? Why can't I open my heart to them?" (Deshpande 23).

Sumi tries to fight against her husband with her full courage but maintains a sympathetic, smooth and friendly relationship with her children. Sumi is always united with them cordially. Sumi is basically a submissive woman and a silent bearer of all such injustice, suppression, oppression of the biased Indian patriarchal society. Even she is also ready to yield herself for the welfare of the family. She never exposes any kind of frustration, anger, annoyance and irritation towards any one on contrast with other familial women. She is a woman of politeness, humbleness, adjusting with others and a dependent woman of her family. Whenever her daughters question her or ask for anything, she answers them with love, patience and put efforts to let them understand the truth. Sumi's endurance, meek nature, stillness and patience fetch several difficulties in her life.

The very interesting thing is that, Deshpande has created Sumi with full of kindness, love and care. Even she is unable to question against Gopal for whom the entire family has shattered and lost its happiness. She doesn't have any sense of revenge against her husband, instead still she tolerates all the injustices and inequalities. Sumi's eldest daughter Aru, who wants to take revenge against her father for his decision. She calls Gopal as a callous husband and a brutal father. She questions her father that "Why did you get married at all, why did you have children?" (Deshpande12).

Gopal desertion has paved way to the mental stress, chaos and great disturbance of the family members. Especially for Sumi, who is in a very pathetic condition and tries to improve her ability to survive in the complicated world with her three daughters and parents. Though she is economically dependent, her self respect denies her to fulfil any need from the known people. She never wants herself to be understood by others as a woman struggling with her daughters in the absence of her husband, instead like to be a woman lives with her daughters with full of happiness, self respect, pride and freedom. In order to be a self reliable person, Sumi learns to ride a scooter and other vehicles. She fills herself with self confidence and self motivation without others influence in her personal life. She has created her own rules and living methods for the new beginning of her life.

Many efforts were taken to reunite the couple. On her part, Devaki arranged a family get together party to reunite them which remained simply a failure. Sumi finds herself failed in understand her husband's notions and their reconciliation. After all the failures, Sumi decides to become a self reliable, confident and

courageous woman and like to look after her daughters. Sumi wants to give up the patriarchal norms specially made for women. She wishes to earn money for their livelihood. Sumi reveals her plan to go for a job in a residential school. She also declares that Seema is accompany with her the remaining will be stay with their grand parents. Sumi tells Aru that, "Be happy for me, Aru. This is the first thing in my life I think that I've got for myself" (Deshpande 230).

Sumi's plan to goes to Devgiri for a job along with Seema impact her another daughter Charu in a different angle. She admits that: "Charu is the first to react, suddenly and to her own surprise, bursting into tears. It's the loud and unabashed grief of a child. 'I can't believe it, you're leaving us and going away, how can you do that? It's not fair', she says between her sobs, it's not fair" (Deshpande 230). Charu's grand mother attempts to console her and wiped her tears with her sari and says, "Let her go, child, let her go" (Deshpande 230). It exposes a girl child's immeasurable bond with her mother and her longing for her mother's love and care. Though women are restricted in various ways in the name of patriarchy, marriage and male chauvinism, she can never be part from her family and children.

This novel is not only captured the subjugated position of Sumi, also portrayed the subordinated position of women for the past three generations. The author remarks that, "Manorama, Kalyani's mother, whose picture hangs in the hall. There are sudden flashes of resemblance connecting the three women, the different generations creating a sense of continuity in the house" (Deshpande 70). Through this Deshpande correlates the three generations that Vithalrao – Manorama, Shripati – Kalyani and Gopal – Sumi. On the other side like Sumi, her mother also isolated by her own husband Shripati. Both husband and wife were remained in a very long silence for the last Thirty years. Shripati lives in the upstairs of the same house who never care about his wife Kalyani and spent his life with loneliness. Aru asks her grand mother about his isolation, she painfully revealed the story behind their silence. Once upon a time Kalyani was travelled Bangalore to spend the holidays, she had lost her mentally retarded male child in a railway station. Shripati searched his son nearly two months like a mad man wandered all over the near by streets, railway platforms, beaches even hospitals and mortuaries. In spite of all his efforts he failed. Shripati firmly believes that because of Kalyani's carelessness he lost his mentally retarded son.

She says that:

Baba obviously thought she did. If not, why did he...' she searches for the exact word. 'Cut himself so completely away from her? Thirty years? No, more than that. Imagine not speaking to your own wife for over thirty years. But Aru, he was her son. (Deshpande142)

After hearing the truth, Aru was so shocked and advises her grand mother that “its important to her that you speak out, state the truth, that you stand up and defend yourself, that you refuse to be misjudged” (Deshpande 143). Kalyani accepts that was an unexpected accident, no mother could possibly do such an evil thing.

It is regarded as a pride to have a male child in a family especially in a country like India. In fact, Indian patriarchal system believes that male child is an asset whereas a female child is a burden to the family. Deshpande also highlights the crave for a boy baby in Indian women's mind through the character Goda. Sumi's relative Goda Mavshi is filled with ecstasy when she gave birth to a boy baby and she remarks that “A son is born to me, dear friend, a son is born to me. Nine months I bore the pain and now my house is filled with light” (Deshpande 71). Goda celebrates the birth of her son like a Birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and Lord Krishna in Gokul, Yamuna.

Even Goda's mother Manorama also faced the same thing in her married life. At the earlier stage of her married life, Manorama was shattered by a few miscarriages. Her husband Vithalrao never minds instead his uncle forced him to marry again. Manorama had finally given birth to a daughter (Kalyani). This time his uncle asked him to adopt a son, who also preferred one of his grandsons. Deshpande admits the patriarchal pressure on women to produce a male heir to the family that:

To Manorama, it was this uncle of her husband's who was the villain of the story; for it was he brought pressure on Vithalrao to marry again, when it was that Manorama, who had finally given birth to a daughter after a series of miscarriages, would have no more children. Failing in this, he tried to induce Vithalrao to adopt a son, preferably one of his grandsons. (Deshpande 128)
Manorama's life exemplifies the society's urge to have a male heir for the family and the priority given to the male child in Indian family.

Manorama's daughter Kalyani is a very clever girl and enriched her potential like her father from her childhood itself. Kalyani says that “I was a clever girl,” Kalyani said once. ‘I was very good at Maths like my father. He wanted me to become an engineer- can you believe that? You will be the first woman engineer in the country, he used to say” (Deshpande 128-129). Her mother Manorama denied to complete her schooling and forced her to marry her own brother Shripati. In order to retain the asset of the family within themselves Manorama did this to her own daughter, then only she felt secure and safe. It shows how women are treated as a commodity in the hands of men though they are intellectual.

The pathetic marital lives of the three generation women impact a lot in Aru's psyche. She has begun to see all the women as merely a victim of male

chauvinistic society. In fact, Aru is able to find a victim in every woman and a betrayer in every man. Premi reveals the story of her patient to Aru. A pregnant young woman came to her hospital for the treatment, who admits that her husband is an AIDS patient. That man is actually aware of his disease, even after that he got married her. He married that innocent young woman just to look after him in his difficult conditions. After hearing this Aru has shocked and exposed her concern for that young woman. She defines that as a new dimension of betrayal and cruelty in the man-woman relationship.

The novel ends with the unexpected twist that the dual death of Sumi and her father Shripati by a cruel accident. The death news of the two people knocks the door of the family that, Prasad, who, on his way to work, finds the road blocked and, moving through the crowd, sees and recognizes the two mangled bodies. Shripati flung off the scooter some distance away to land under the wheels of another vehicle, is dead. Sumi, barely alive, has been taken to hospital. They get the news of her death in the afternoon. (Deshpande 233)

The sudden loss of her husband and daughter affects the health of Kalyani, who is suffered by paralysis. In order to breaking out of her paralysis Aru tries to console her and says that, “Amma, I’m here, I’m your daughter, Amma, I’m your son, I’m here with you, Amma, I’m here...” (Deshpande 233). Aru is the only soul who always care Kalyani, according to her Kalyani is the most injured victim than her mother Sumi.

Aru is the right person to carry on all the house hold activities after their death. She looks after all the relations and firmly control the challenged situation of the family. She could understand the real value of her mother, after the death. She thinks that she can be like Sumi with full of strength and courage and hope for the bright future of the family. Finally, Aru decides that she should not allow herself to subjugate, suppress and underestimate by the male chauvinistic society. She also vows that never yield herself to the biased restrictions and patriarchal norms. Through this novel, Deshpande vividly exposes the subjugated and traumatic state of women and their predicaments. She also gives a solution to their problems that women should not surrender themselves to the will of men through the character Aru.

References:

Deshpande, Shashi. A Matter of Time, Penguin Books, India, 1996.