

Gender Inequality in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter Of Time*

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Abstract :

Gender inequality acknowledges that men and women are not equal and that gender affects an individual's life experience. These differences arise from distinctions in biology, psychology and cultural norms. Gender inequality is a threatening problem which cause unfair treatment in society between genders. Shashi Deshpande's novel *A Matter Of Time* (1996) revolves around four generation of women Manorama, Kalyani, Sumi and Aru. She reveals a remarkable insight of a woman's psyche by representing woman in different roles like daughter, wife, mother and an individual who seeks her gender identity. Deshpande moves this story beyond feministic concern. The novel moves around the character Gopal, he abandons his wife Sumi and three daughters Aru, Charu and Seema. Deshpande shows in this novel, that female child is considered as a burden and unwanted child to the family.

Keywords: Inequality, Desertion, Exploitation, Forsaken, Abandon

Shashi Deshpande represents the pain of Indian middle class women. Deshpande shows the suffering of women under the hands of their husbands. In *A Matter of Time* Deshpande portrays the lady Sumi, who is exploited by her husband. It is a very fearful story of Indian woman caught in the trap of male dominated society. Marriage plays a vital role in the life of women. After marriage women devotes their life whole heartedly to their husbands. They keep their martial home happy and peaceful one. Women are considered as only the breeding machine. In an interview with Geetha Gangadharan Deshpande says, "I have a very strong feeling that until very recently women in our society have been looked down upon as breeding animals. They have no other role in life. I have a strong objection to treating any human being in that manner" (II).

Lack of the male child is the major core in this novel. The birth of a male child is celebrated in a grand manner. But the birth of female child is considered as a sinful one. The main reason for this is that during that the time of death the male child cremates parents so they need male child, also they think male children only earn money for the family and take care of them in the old age. So in Indian society people never give equal rights to both sexes. They show some partial complex between the two genders. Women never get any freedom like men in the society and their family but Deshpande's female characters in this novel are free, independent, and bold. They are not under the roof of men. They have an identity and overcome their struggles. G.S. Amur remarks : "Women's Struggle, in the context of contemporary society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important at all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande major concern as a creative writer and this appears in all her important stories"(13).

When the novel opens, Sumi is sitting on the sofa and watching television, when her husband tells her that he is leaving her. Sumi is left alone with her three daughters in the flat. So she decides to go back to her parent's home. The scene of Gopal's desertion is described by Keerthi Ramachandra, "One evening, while Sumi is watching a film on TV about circus, without the dirt, the smells, the fear and despair of the real thing, but sanitized bacteria free"(21)

Sumi is deserted by her husband after twenty three years of married life. Even though Sumi's marriage is not an arranged marriage. They loved each other and finally got married. But he suddenly forsakes Sumi without any reason. Gopal leaves all his responsibilities and stays a few miles away from his family. Gopal's childhood was also filled with desertions because his life was not a normal one. His father marries his own brother's widow wife out of this marriage only Gopal is born. Later only he knows about his birth so he feels insecure. Afterwards he is isolated from others. He is haunted by loneliness.

After marriage Gopal has been longing for a male child. Through a male heir he wants to prove his fatherliness. Fathers are central to the emotional well being of their children; they are capable disciplinarians. Gopal is different from other fathers, his ideas are also different. He thinks that a male child would take care of

him and earn money for the family. He wants to depend upon them. But unfortunately Sumi gives birth to three daughters. He has not shown any interest on female children. He has not taken care of them as a father. He considers himself as an unlucky man in the world because his desire of having a son is not fulfilled. Gopal never shares his happiness, feelings and emotions to others. He suppresses all his thoughts to himself.

Finally, Sumi returns with her three daughters to her parent's house. Deshpande gives a huge explanation about the big house. The name of the house is called Vishwas. "It is obvious that it was built by a man not just for himself, but for his sons and his son's sons" (AMT 3).

The need for a male child is very well presented in this novel. In the Indian society female children are cursed and abused in the society. The Parents think of female children and worry about their marriage and dowry. So many female children are dominated in their family. Still now in many places female children do not get any education and proper identity.

In this novel four generations of the family only demands male child than female. But by their fate they only have female child. The first generation Manorama and Vithalrao both want a male child. But unluckily Manorama failed to give birth to a male child. So, Manorama feels upset and also she has a fear whether her husband would marry another woman for male child.

The thought of Indian women as they fail to bear a male child, turns their life into thorny surface. Even though they have two or three girl babies, they wait for a boy baby with full hope. Likewise, Manorama always prefers a boy than girl baby. "Manorama wanted a son; instead there was Kalyani. Not an unloved child, no never that. But for Manorama, she became the visible symbol for their failure to have a son" (AMT 150-151).

Vithalrao wants to give good education to his daughter Kalyani but Manorama did not allow her daughter for higher studies. She denied to show love and care towards her daughter. Manorama chooses her own brother Shripati for Kalyani's partner through which Manorama wants to save her property. At last Kalyani has to accept Shripati as her husband.

The second generation is Kalyani and Shripati. Their marriage life is also an unsuccessful one. Kalyani gives birth to two daughters that is Sumi and Premi and also gives birth to one son. The entire family becomes happy but their happiness soon shatters because her son is mentally retard.

Kalyani loses her son while she comes back from Bangalore. She loses her son at V.T.Station which enrages the whole family. Shripati searches his baby every where but he never finds out the baby. Shripati behaves like a mad man. After wards Shripati becomes a drunkard and there is a war between Shripati and Kalyani.

In the Indian society the male child is considered as the pillar of next generation and they believe if the family has a male child, they attain a respectable status in the society. Kalyani's male child was a mentally retarded baby but the family did not worry it. They considered him as the male heir for their family.

Manorama always misunderstood Kalyani. After this incident she cursed and abused Kalyani. Shripati stopped speaking to Kalyani. So, she comes back to her mother's house as a rejected wife. This enrages her more and more. Vithalrao feels for his daughter's life and soon he dies of stroke. Manorama starts scolding Kalyani because she considers Kalyani as the main reason for her husband's death. Manorama says "You are my enemy, you were born to make my life miserable" (AMT 153). These words attack Kalyani deeply. Kalyani and Shripati do not talk for many years. In the house they behave like strangers. But Shripati is not like Gopal. He cares for his daughters and shows love towards them. Kalyani feels very lonely.

Kalyani's tension and stress becomes double because the third generation Gopal and Sumi's life is also parallel one to her life. Sumi is also forsaken by Gopal. Now Sumi lives with her mother. For the same reason, not having a male child. The entire family feels very bad about the life of Sumi. Premi and other family members try to give more support and console to Sumi. But Sumi accepts her fate as a rejected wife. She believes that she never can reunite with Gopal. She realizes:

We can never be together again. All these days I have thinking of him as if he has been suspended in space, in nothingness, since he left us. But he has gone on living; his life has moved on, it will go on without me. So has mine. Our lives have diverged; they now move separately, two different streams... I must go she says. He does not speak, he does nothing to stop her (AMT 85)

Like Manorama, Kalyani never ill-treats Sumi. Kalyani considers her daughters valuable in her life. Because of her bitter relationship with her mother Manorama, Kalyani proves herself as a good mother. She is ready to help her daughter. She gives more support and comfort to her daughter. But Sumi does not like to be a 'parasite' to depend on her mother's family and others. She does not expect any financial support and other needs from others. She does not allow Aru to get any maintenance from Gopal. Shashi says in an interview with Vimal Rao:

Sumi's acceptance is not passive. She blocks out the unpleasantness. She has a good opinion of herself and she is more concerned with getting on with getting on with life. She does not want pity as she would do anything for pride. She distances even her husband. The point is, they are both unusual people. People are puzzled by the abandoned wife not feeling bad. (9)

Sumi never seeks divorce from her husband. She develops more courage and boldness to get job and stand her own legs without depending on others. She gets a job in a school. She starts writing and her first play "The Gardener's Son" becomes a successful one. She wants to rewrite the story of Surpanakha from her own point of way. She says "Female sexuality we're ashamed of owning it, we can't speak of it, not even to our ourselves. But Surpanakha was not, she spoke of her desires, she flaunted them. And therefore, were the men, unused to such women, frightened? Did they feel threatened by her? I think so...It is this Surpanakha I'm going to write about".(AMT 191)

Aru the fourth generation plays the binary role in this novel. She acts like a male child in the family. After her father's desertion she boldly demands family maintenance from her father. She meets her father and

ask questions very gently. Aru bluntly says to her father “Why did you get married at all, Why did you have children?” (AMT 62). This shows Aru’s anger and hatred towards her father.

Unfortunately Aru loses her mother and grandfather in an accident. After that she only takes all the responsibilities of the family. She care her sisters and grandmother. Sumi’s daughters establish their own identity. Aru becomes a lawyer and Charu is on the way of medicine. Deaths of Sumi and Shripati make Kalyani more upset. She becomes faint but Aru persuades Kalyani and consoles her through the words “... Amma I’m here, I’m your daughter. Amma I’m your son; I’m here with you, Amma I’m here ...”(AMT 233). The three daughters try to find their own way and do not depend on their men folk. Finally in this novel women prove their own power in the male dominated society. The female characters in this story attains the superior place than male.

In *A Matter Of Time* Shashi Deshpande portrays gender discrimination through the characters Aru, Sumi and Kalyani. Gender discrimination cannot be solved easily in the society. Gender inequality is obviously an urgent problem in the world. So Deshpande realizes the necessity for women’s education and economic independence may change the gender problem in the society. Deshpande wants to create some changes among the people. Hence this work is unique.

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