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Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*: A Horrifying Tale of Marital Relationships Dr. Tukaram S. Sawant

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande, one of the most popular Indian woman novelists in English began her literary career with the publication of her first short story in 1970. Her first novel, The Dark Holds No Terrors published in 1980, brought her a lot of praise and admiration. Her novel, That Long Silence, won her the Sahitya Academy Award. She has eleven novels, four children's books and essays to her credit. She has been awarded Padma Shri for a significant contribution she has made in the field of Indian English novel. Her novels emerge out of Indian soil and context. They are an outcome of her observations of the life of educated middle-class Indian women caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy. She is basically concerned with the theme of human relationships in which the woman at the centre and the woman's struggle for freedom, selfrealization and self-assertion in a contemporary Indian patriarchal set-up. She deals with her sorrows and sufferings, pain and agony, plight and predicament, suppression and exploitation. Her major concerns are with man-woman relationships within and outside marriage. Marriage plays a vital role in the life of an Indian woman. However, a happy marriage is not everyone's cup of tea. Deshpande's women try their level best for happiness and harmony in their marital families. However, most marriages in her novels are unhappy failures. Always in the mood of tolerance and sacrifice, she allows herself to be taken for granted by her male-counter-part. The present article intends to assess Deshpande's novel, A Matter of Time, as a horrifying story of failed marital relationships.

Key Words: exploitation, gender-discrimination, horrifying, patriarchy, predicament, suppression

Shashi Deshpande, an award-winning Indian woman novelist in English, expresses her concern for middle-class Indian women, victimized creatures caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy. Her novels are made out of her observations of the female life around her. Like the novels of Jane Austen, her novels are woman-oriented. She sincerely writes of what she sees, feels and thinks for herself. Her novels are about the place and position of an Indian woman in a male-centric Indian society with its issues like

gender-discrimination, male-ego and male-domination, and problems related to marital relationships as well. She strongly believes that it is necessary for the woman to live within human relationships. She occupies an important position as a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, and most importantly as a human being in all relationships. G. S. Amur remarks: "Women's struggle, in the context of a contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, is Shashi

Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer". (Amur13). An Indian woman, she believes, is required to make many adjustments and compromises to keep marital relationships intact. She tries her level best to maintain peace, happiness and harmony in her marital family. However, all marriages, love as well as arranges, with a few exceptions, in Deshpande's novels are unhappy failures.

Marriage plays a vital role in the life of an Indian woman. It helps her to keep her social dignity intact; it frees her from the trap of her parental home deeply rooted in orthodox customs, conventions traditions. It is a turning point especially in the life of the woman. It is an ordeal especially for the woman as she is expected to adjust herself completely to a new environment of her husband's home. However, her tragedy lies in the fact that she sets herself from one cage only to be caught in another cage. A patriarchal authority and domination is so deeply rooted in our culture that it is difficult for an Indian woman to escape from it. Jessica Benjamin observers: "The anchoring of this structure so deep in the psyche is what gives domination its appearance of inevitability, makes it seem that a relationship in which both participants are subjects - both empowered and mutually respectful - is impossible." (12). She puts finger on the woman's sexual submissiveness and subjectivity, and her recognition as an object used by a man to fulfil his sexual desire. She is destined to submit to the sexual desire of her husband and ungrudgingly. passively Women, Deshpande believes, need not be reduced to the level of a mere breeding machine. She

said in an interview: "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 in life. I have a strong objection to treating any human being in that manner". (Gangadharan). She feels utterly humiliated at the very thought of women being used as an object. But this has been their unavoidable tragedy since time immemorial.

The woman herself, to a large extent, is the architect of her own destiny. Born with divine virtues like silence, endurance, tolerance, sacrifice, she is ever ready to allow herself to be used as a plaything by her male-counterpart. She is aware of her gender identity. Stoller defines gender identity: "Gender identity starts with the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not the other, though as one develops, gender identity becomes much more complicated so that, for example, one may sense himself as not only a male but a masculine man or an effeminate man or even as a man who fantasies being a woman". (Stoller1968). A man knows that he is the man and a woman the woman. Both man and woman are likely to be naturally different in their attitude to life. To a large extent, a man's approach to everything in life seems to be dominating and aggressive whereas a woman's meek and submissive. The woman believes that he is incomplete without her parents before her marriage and without her husband after her marriage. Marriage is something that matters most in her life. It is a turning point in her life.

Simone de Beauvoir writes: "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by

society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution . . . It has always been a very different thing for man and for woman. The two sexes are necessary to each other, but this necessity has never brought about a condition of reciprocity between them . . . A man is socially an independent and complete individual . . . the girl seems absolutely passive; she is married, given in marriage by her parents . . . In marrying . . . she takes his name; she belongs to his religion, his class, his class; she joins his family, she becomes his 'half'. . . She gives him her person, virginity and a rigorous fidelity being required . . . No doubt marriage can afford certain material and sexual conveniences: it frees the individual from loneliness, it establishes him security in space and time by giving him a home and children; it is a definite fulfillment of his existence". (Beauvoir 445-451). She gives her husband almost everything. She sacrifices her name, person, self, identity, freedom, virginity, dreams and aspirations. She becomes her husband's ardhangini. The functions assigned to her after her marriage are: to satisfy her husband's sexual needs, to provide children to her family and to take care of her husband, children and household. Though, she considers marriage a road leading her to happiness and freedom, she, soon, realizes that it is something that enslaves the woman to a man in one form or the other. Marriage does not assure her freedom and happiness. Simone de Beauvoir

writes: "The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness - there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness - but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine". (Beauvoir 496).

Most marriages, in Deshpande, are unhappy failures. They are fraught with one or the other kind of disease or malady. The tragedy of marriage, according to Simone de Beauvoir, is that it mutilates the woman and it dooms her to repetition and routine, and that "it is the duplicity of the husband that dooms the wife to a misfortune of which he complains later that he is himself the victim. Just as he wants her to be at once warm and cool in bed, he requires her to be wholly his and yet no burden; he wishes her to establish in a fixed place on earth and to leave him free, to assume the monotonous daily round and not to bore him, to be always at hand and never importunate; he wants to have her all to himself and not to belong to her; to live as one of a couple and to remain alone. Thus she is betrayed from the day he marries her". (Beauvoir 496). Nature has really played a trick on the woman by making her tolerate everything in the name of genderdistinction and marriage. It has also played a trick on her by making her dream of seeking happiness only through a man. It is but natural for her to aspire for natural companionship, physical, mental and emotional satisfaction, social status and material comforts, respect and unfortunately she is far away from the realization of her dreams and aspirations.

Saru's dream of a happy marriage, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is shattered to pieces on account of marital violence.

Manju, in If I Die Today, is not happy in her marital life. Indu's dream to be free, complete and happy in her marital life with Javant, in Roots and Shadows, is also not realized. For her marriage is a trap or "a cage with two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other". (Deshpande61). Akka, too, suffers a lot on account of maritalviolence. For Jaya, in That Long Silence, a marriage is a pair of bullocks yoked together. She accepts her husband as a sheltering tree. Mohan's mother has been a silent sufferer all through her marital life. Kalpana, in *The Binding Vine*, was brutally raped, physically and mentally tortured in her marital life. Her mother, Shakutai says: "I kept telling her, men are like animals". (147). Aparna, in Strangers to Ourselves, has been deceived in her marital life which ends in a divorce and which makes her lose her trust it the very feeling of love. The truth is that no married woman in Deshpande's novels is happy. Who are to be blamed for the failure of marriage? Simone de Beauvoir opines: "Individuals are not to be blamed for the failure of marriage; it is the institution of marriage itself". (Beauvoir 497). Deshpande makes sincere efforts to project a manwoman relationship in her novels. The present article is an attempt to assess her novel, A Matter of Time, as horrifying story of marital relationships.

A Matter of Time is an exploration of the strained marital relationships deeply rooted in a strangely oppressive silence. Gopal and Sumi's marital relationship is at the centre of the novel. It is projected along with a few more marital relationships, those of Vithalrao and Manorama, Shripati and Kalyani, Anil and Premi, Satyanarayan and

Goda, Vasudev Murthy and Devaki, Ramesh and Chitra, and of P. K. and Sudha. The novel opens with Sumi's coming back to her ancestral home as a deserted wife along with her three daughters, Arundhati, Charulata and Seema. Her husband, Gopal, deserts his family for the reasons known to nobody and stays a few miles away from his wife and daughters in the house of Shankar, one of his old students. He, too, does not know the exact reason of his abandoning his wife and children. He seems to be totally confused. To state the truth, he is running away from his duties and responsibilities towards his wife and daughters. Sumi's coming back to the Big House is a great shock to her mother, Kalyani, who cries out in agony: "No, my god, not again". (Deshpande12). Kalyani, who is much worried about Sumi, goes to see Gopal and bursts out: "What have you done to my daughter, Gopala, don't do this, don't let it happen to my daughter, what happened to me? . . . When Sumi married you, she was too young; but I was not anxious for her, you were older, you were sensible and you cared for her . . . how can you change so much, Gopala?" (Deshpande46). Gopal is amazed to see her speaking not with anger and hostility, but with affection and tenderness. She earnestly requests him not to punish her. Out of her concern for her daughter, she goes on saying: "I know she didn't bother too much about her home. But Gopala . . . how could she have known what being a good wife means when she never saw her mother being one? I taught her nothing, it's all, my fault, Gopala, forgive me and don't punish her for it . . . Is it money, Gopala? If it is, you know that Sumi and you will have everything of

mine. Premi is comfortable; I am not worried about her. Even my jewellery - most of it is for Sumi . . . What about your daughters? Have you thought of them?" (Deshpande 47-48). Her earnestly requesting him not to punish her, not to leave her, speaks a lot about her concern, care and affection for her daughter. However, she fails to persuade him and leaves him with a sense of regret and failure. Aru, too, tries to know the reason of her father's desertion, and when she fails, she, with a sense of bitterness, calls her father a callous husband, an unloving father and an unfeeling man, Premi and other family members also attempt to find out the reason behind Gopal's strange and mysterious decision but in vain.

During the early years of his marital life, Gopal was very happy with his wife. He was filled with emotions and excitement. Almost in the heaven, he thought to himself: "So I married Sumi. And I knew I was right, it was my body that told me the truth. I never had any doubts about my feelings for her . . . I knew I needed her, her warmth, her humanness, her womanness . . . It was my body that told me the truth once again, my body that could lie beside Sumi night after night, quiescent, feeling nothing. After the earlier humiliation of my inability to sustain my excitement, of being unable to go on, this was peaceful. But I could not avoid the truth; I knew it was over . . . But how could I have said this to Aru: Marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes - a lifetime of commitment - is not possible for all of us". (Deshpande 68-69). He feels humiliated by his inability to sustain his excitement with his wife night after night, his inability

to go on with his physical relationship with her. He begins to believe that the life of the body ends one day or the other. The demand of lifetime commitment that marriage makes, he feels, is not possible.

Sumi wonders whether the love and the desire for possession are enough to keep the marriage intact. She remembers: "For a brief while, Gopal and I were part of this eternal story too. We fell in love. I fell in love with his physical being first. I have to admit that. . . but this passes. We don't need to be saints to turn away from physical pleasures. We don't have to go such a long way, either, as Yayati did, to realize that a time comes when the pleasures of the body pall. They taste flat, insipid, perhaps, even bitter. We want love to last, we think when we begin that it will, but it never does; it transforms itself into a desire for possession, a struggle for power. What lasts then? The loss of the familiar rustling by my side at night is what I mourn, not our lovemaking. I feel cold without the presence of Gopal in my life; sex has nothing to do with it, no, nothing at all". (Deshpande168). She regrets that love does not last long and it transforms into a mere desire for possession which fails to keep the marriage intact. Though, she feels cold in the absence of Gopal in her life after his desertion, she accepts reality of her being an abandoned wife and tries to cope with it with grace and courage. She recollects Nagi's philosophy summed up in a sentence: "Some people like that". are (Deshpande179). She feels: "For Nagi, perhaps, with an irresponsible husband, one son dead, the other uncaring, and a dependent daughter, this mantra is the only thing that makes life possible. What other

way of survival is there?" (Deshpande180). She seems to have decided to follow Nagi's *mantra* in her life with a view to make her life possible and bearable. She believes that it is better for her to accept her life as it is and to move on with it all by herself.

Sumi sees Gopal for the first time since the day he left the home, since the night he told her about his desire to go away. There is an unbearable burden of unsaid things between them. They need to talk to each other as silence between them is dangerous, frightening and treacherous. To begin with, they speak of Shankar and his family, of the children playing outside and of Gopal's work in the press. There is a mysterious tension between them. Sumi realizes that they can never be together as husband and wife again; he is going with his life; his life is moving on and it will go on without her. She also knows that her life too goes on without him. She accepts: "Our lives have diverged; they now move separately, two different streams". (Deshpande85). She wants to be alone; she wants to enjoy the pleasure and liberty of being alone, and not to be disturbed on her bed at night by her husband. Since her return, Sumi and Gopal's failed marriage has been at the centre of everybody's talk in the family. Devaki, who is hit by Sumi's failed marriage, arranges a family get-together to which both Sumi and Gopal are invited. Devaki's It reconciliation unsuccessful attempt at between them.

Gopal sees Sumi who is sitting erect in a tall chair, her profile delicate and sharp against the glitter and colour of a *Tanjore* painting on the wall behind her. He can see her who has made herself up, something she does

only for the parties. He remembers the way she got ready for such occasions. He can see her now, "sitting before the mirror, looking earnestly at herself, drawing the lipstick carefully across her lips pursuing them together, a thoughtful look on her face as if she is tasting the lipstick. And then, standing up to wear the sari, her left hand deftly making the pleats, drawing her breath in so that she can tuck them in, patting them flat, down". and smoothing them (Deshpande106). He can also see the same two bangles she has been wearing since her marriage. He sees Sumi smiling at him without any embarrassment. He is amazed and awed by the way she talks to the strangers. Sumi knows what Devaki is hoping for. She asks: "Did you expect Gopal and me to fall into each other's arms in your living room? . . . You silly girl, why are you crying? . . . I've never been able to cry easily, you know that. And what do I say, Devi? That my husband has left me and I don't know why and maybe he doesn't really know, either? And that I'm angry and humiliated and confused". (Deshpande107). She knows that the tears in Devaki's eyes are for her failed marriage. She also knows: "To both Premi and Devaki, Gopal and she were 'the lovers', the touchstone for all lovers henceforth". (Deshpande107). Now, these 'lovers' have become the two poles apart, two streams flowing in opposite directions.

During her final visit to Gopal, Sumi's real intention is to remind him of what he said to her the night they decided to get married. She says: "You said that at any time if either of us wanted to be free, the other would let go. We are not going to be tied together . . .

and I agreed . . . Then you began to move away from me . . . When you left, I knew I would not question you; I would just let you go. None of them, not even our daughters . . . could understand me . . . And I had to go back home with my daughters, I had to live with my parents. I had to see what had happened to my mother. I was frightened. It seemed like something being repeated - my mother then, me now . . . But now I know my life is not like my mother's. Our life, yours and mine, was complete". (Deshpande 221-222). She thinks that her life is different from that of her mother who has not spoken to her husband for more than thirty-five years in the sense that she is free to talk to her husband at her will. She considers herself more fortunate than her mother who is compelled to live in oppressive silence.

Gopal's dream of being totally free is realized only because his wife sets him free of his duties and responsibilities towards his wife and daughters. All of a sudden, the girl he had married comes to his mind. He remembers Sumi sleeping in the bus with her head on his shoulder, unaware of the crowd around them. He is in his thoughts of their travel together as husband and wife in a bus. He recollects every minute details of the time they spent together: "When we reached our destination, I woke you up and you got off obediently and staggered after me like a sleepy child. We got to the guest house where we were to spend our honeymoon . . . And there was no food for us . . . So we ate what we had with us and then I bathed but you went off to sleep almost immediately. It was a deep and easy sleep . . . When I woke up in the morning you were not in bed . . . I got out of the

room, went down the steps and there was the river. You were in it as I had expected, floating, as if you were weightless . . . I joined you in the river. You were wearing your nightdress and it was clinging to you above your waist, but below, in the water, it billowed and ballooned about your body so that I could touch your bare flesh. I could feel it respond to my touch. I touched your face with my hands, with my lips and it was like touching a flower wet with dew . . . We came out of the water then, we went to our room and it was there, with the sound of the river in ours still that we came together for the first time. And I knew then that it was for this, this losing yourself in another human being, that men give up their dreams of freedom". (Deshpande 222-223). Gopal is excited at the thought of coming together to lose oneself completely in another human being, at the thought of their physically coming together. He comes out of his thoughts and realizes that his body, after almost a year, is awake with a desire to be physically united with Sumi. He is angry with himself and his thoughts. Sumi knows that she can do nothing for him. She gets up and leaves him never to meet him again.

For Manorama, Kalyani's mother, who is denied a son, Kalyani becomes a visible symbol of their failure to have a son. When Manorama realizes that she can no more give birth to a child, she fears that her husband, Vithalrao may adopt a son or marry again. She feels insecure at the thought of Kalyani's getting married and becoming a part of another family. Kalyani, though clever and intelligent, is not allowed to complete her education, and instead, is married off to her mother's brother, Shripati.

After this marriage, Manorama feels secure at the certainty that the family property will remain in the family. Since her marriage, the Big House becomes a living presence for Kalyani. However, after her son, Madhav's loss, the very course of her marital life undergoes a sudden change. While coming home to Bangalore for the holidays, she loses her four-year old mentally retarded child. She, with her daughters, is left on the platform surrounded by the curious strangers. She is brought back from Bombay by her father. They do not see Shripati nearly for two months. He goes about the city like a madman, searching the streets, railway platforms, beaches, even hospitals and mortuaries, but never finding his lost son, the only heir to his property. He has not spoken to his wife since the day it happened.

Kalyani is a typical Indian woman who is a victim of mental violence and torture. Hers is a story of a strange oppressive silence imposed on her by her husband. Shripati cannot tolerate even the shadow of his wife. His keeping himself away from her speaks a lot about a strained relationship between them. Kalyani, too, is silent and frozen at the sight of her husband and she is unable to shake off the paralysis of fear. Shipati has almost shut himself in the room upstairs. Sumi remembers, once, after having seen her father in his room upstairs, she closes the door gently behind her. And as she stands there, thinking of her father, a strange thing happens. It is like a visitation, an apparition that she sees, developing before her like a sketch, and finally becoming a recognizable figure. To her surprise, the figure is no other than her mother herself. She sees her standing before the closed door,

banging on it with her open palms, shrieking out something, slumping at last on the floor. She remembers everything, sees herself as a child standing there terrified, watching her mother lie in a huddle. After all these years, on her return to the Big House, She knows: "It did happen. I saw it, I saw my mother lying there". (Deshpande74). The image of that blood-edged human shape is still with her. She remembers Kalyani banging wildly, vainly on the closed door of her husband's room.

Why does Kalyani tolerate injustice and savagery? Is it because she is a wife and not a widow? Is it because she wants to enjoy the right to all the privileges of the wife of a living husband? Is it because she thinks herself to be fortunate to have a living husband, no matter he has not looked at her face for years, no matter he has not spoken to her for years? She must have been ready with answers to all these questions, but, being a typical Indian woman, she keeps her answers to herself. She lives happily because her Kumkum is intact, because she can move freely in the company of other women with the pride of a wife. Sumi wonders: "Is this what has helped Kalyani to endure everything, the fact that she is a wife and not a widow?" (Deshpande.167). She is worried about her father as well. She fails to understand the reason of his turning to isolation, of keeping himself aloof from the rest of the family, including his daughters. She thinks to herself: "My father gave up everything and turned to solitude . . . he turned his back on his wife because he was frightened of himself of what he could do in his anger. I have sensed it in him, a kind of suppressed savagery. Or maybe that was

only an excuse which helped him to get out of a marriage he had never wanted. Who knows the truth? I only know that, sometimes, he seems to me as much a victim as Kalyani . . . When Aru speaks of the 'sins of patriarchy', I am uneasy . . . For things are never so simple. We can never know all the incalculables hidden in the human heart. Why did my father come back? Was it his sense of responsibility towards his wife and daughters? To return to a wife he had spurned, to give up the ambitions and career which had become his whole life - no, that is something I can never understand". (Deshpande 168-169). She accepts her inability to understand what he has done to his wife and daughters, and also to himself. Though she tries, she fails to know the nature of the relationship between her parents.

Sumi and Shripati get killed in an accident. On receiving the news of their death, Kalyani, immediately turning to Goda, cries out in a terrible voice: "Look at me, Goda, look at me", (Deshpande 233), and falls down on the floor in a slow motion. Late at night, she is found sitting up and crying out the name by which she had called the man who was later to become her husband, crying at last for him. It is difficult for Aru to forget two pictures: "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". (Deshpande244). After his accidental death, Shripati leaves the house, not to Kalyani, his wife, but to Kalyani, the daughter of Vithalrao and Manorama. As the will is being read by Anil, Goda anxiously looks at Kalyani, but for Kalyani, "There

was no sting in the words that took away her marital status. On the contrary, it is as if the words have given her something she had lost; they seem, in fact, to have strengthened her". (Deshpande245). The words seem to have given her something more than the house; the words seem to have restored the strength of her mind.

sister, successful Premi, Sumi's professional, a mother of Nikhil, a sevenyear-old son, is a wife of Anil, a successful and prosperous lawyer. Her marital family is just like a family in a movie. She feels: "At first it had been like watching a movie - it was pleasing, interesting, pretty, but it could not possibly be true. People did not really talk to each other so easily, they did not hug and touch and use words of endearment so casually. No, it was a false picture; the truth was a father who stayed in his room, who never came out, never spoke to you, and a mother who put her hand on your mouth so that you did not cry out . . ." (Deshpande 18). Compared to her mother and sister, she is happy in her marital life. However, she believes that a woman needs a husband and her life is incomplete without him.

Kalyani's mother, Manorama, a daughter of a poor man from a village, a wife of Vithalrao, has never been happy in her marital life, not on account of her husband, but on account of her unfulfilled desire to have a son. She has always wanted a son but there is Kalyani, the root cause of her disappointment. Though, Goda and Satyanarayan's marital life, too, is quite comfortable, she is always complaining about her husband who actually is an easytempered man, a good provider and a loving and cheerful companion always ready to

please his wife. He is devoted to his wife even after forty years of their marriage. After her marriage with Vasudev Murthy, a successful architect, Devaki gains confidence and successfully fits and adjusts herself to a kind of life her husband wants. It is with his help, support and co-operation that she becomes an independent and successful woman entrepreneur. Like her, Ramesh's wife, Chitra, too, proves herself a devoted wife and a loving mother of twins,

Jai and Deep. Hers is truly a complete, happy and ideal family living with one another and living for one another. Three pairs, Premi and Anil, Devaki and Vasudev Murthy, Ramesh and Chitra prove that success of a marital life depends on both, husband and wife while Gopal and Sumi, Shripati and Kalyani, on the other hand, are the pairs away from a happy and successful marital life.

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