



Beyond Silence: Time, Loneliness and the Reconstruction of Female Selfhood in Shashi Deshpande's A Matter of Time

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* (1996) presents family relationships not merely as sources of security but also as spaces in which loneliness, silence, memory and individual identity are negotiated. This article examines how Deshpande represents the changing consciousness of women through three generations of a family: Kalyani, Sumi and Aru. The novel begins with Gopal's unexplained desertion of Sumi and her three daughters, but the narrative gradually moves beyond the question of abandonment to explore deeper forms of emotional isolation within marriage and family life. Kalyani's decades-long silence, Sumi's quiet acceptance and subsequent movement towards independence, and Aru's questioning of patriarchal assumptions represent different responses to loneliness and social expectations. The article argues that Deshpande transforms the conventional narrative of female victimhood into a complex exploration of selfhood and human relationships. Her women are not presented simply as victims of men; rather, they negotiate social pressures, family responsibilities and personal desires in different ways. The novel's treatment of time is equally significant because the past continuously enters the present through memory, family history and inherited experiences. Thus, Deshpande moves beyond a linear understanding of time to show how personal and familial memories shape contemporary identity. *A Matter of Time* ultimately suggests that liberation begins when silence is questioned and when individuals acquire the courage to recognise themselves beyond socially prescribed roles.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande; *A Matter of Time*; loneliness; silence; female selfhood; family relationships; patriarchy

1. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande occupies an important position in Indian writing in English for her sensitive representation of ordinary lives, particularly the emotional and psychological experiences of women. Rather than presenting women exclusively as victims requiring rescue, Deshpande examines their inner conflicts, silences, responsibilities and attempts to construct meaningful identities. Her own statement that she is concerned fundamentally with "the human predicament" and with "moral values" is particularly relevant to *A Matter of Time*.

Published in 1996, *A Matter of Time* begins with a domestic crisis: Gopal abandons his wife Sumi and their three daughters without providing a satisfactory explanation. His departure disrupts the apparent stability of the family and brings together three generations of women—Kalyani, Sumi and Aru. The novel consequently becomes an examination of relationships



rather than a simple story of marital breakdown. The family house, significantly called “Viswas,” suggests stability, yet the people living within it experience profound emotional instability.

This article argues that Deshpande uses loneliness and silence as central conditions through which female selfhood is revealed and reconstructed. The novel also demonstrates that the consequences of patriarchal expectations are transmitted across generations, while education, independence and questioning offer possibilities for change.

2. LONELINESS WITHIN THE FAMILY

One of the striking features of *A Matter of Time* is that loneliness exists even when individuals live together. Kalyani and Sripathi provide the clearest example. After the disappearance of their son Madhav, Kalyani is blamed for the tragedy, although there is no evidence that she was responsible. Sripathi subsequently refuses to speak to her for approximately thirty-five years. They remain under the same roof but exist as emotionally separated individuals. The chapter observes that this arrangement can appear socially acceptable even though silence has replaced communication.

Deshpande therefore challenges the assumption that marriage and family automatically eliminate loneliness. A person may be surrounded by relatives and yet remain psychologically isolated. Kalyani's suffering is particularly significant because her silence is not simply a personal weakness; it is connected with social expectations concerning marriage, motherhood, male heirs and female responsibility.

The novel also exposes the cultural importance attached to the birth of a son. Kalyani's mother, Manorama, fears the insecurity associated with having no male heir and consequently arranges Kalyani's marriage to Sripathi. Later, the loss of Madhav intensifies the family's emotional crisis. The novel thus connects personal suffering with larger social structures surrounding inheritance, masculinity and family continuity.

3. SUMI: FROM ABANDONMENT TO SELF-DETERMINATION

Gopal's abandonment initially appears to make Sumi another victim of patriarchal circumstances. Yet Deshpande avoids presenting her as helpless. Sumi refuses to surrender completely to humiliation or social pity. Instead, she recognises that life must continue and that she has responsibilities towards her daughters.

Her declaration that “Gopal is going his way and I have to go mine” captures the emergence of a new form of female consciousness. Her independence is expressed practically: she learns to ride a scooter, seeks employment and attempts to support and educate her children. Her response to abandonment therefore becomes a process of self-reconstruction.

This transformation is also connected with creativity. Sumi enters the world of writing and produces a play entitled “The Gardener's.” Her creative activity allows her to explore themes such as female sexuality and gender relations. The chapter observes that Gopal's desertion awakens Sumi to the world and enables her to discover her creativity.

Thus, abandonment paradoxically becomes a moment of awakening. Deshpande does not romanticise suffering, but she demonstrates how an imposed crisis can compel an individual to discover capacities that remained suppressed within conventional domestic roles.



4. ARU AND THE VOICE OF A NEW GENERATION

If Kalyani represents silence and Sumi represents quiet self-reliance, Aru represents questioning and open resistance. As a member of the third generation, Aru refuses to accept explanations based solely on tradition. She questions Gopal about his decision to marry and have children and demands that he recognise his responsibilities towards his family.

Aru's development is particularly important because she does not merely reject men or marriage. Her mother warns her against seeing "in every woman a victim and in every man a betrayer." Her questioning therefore has the potential to move beyond simplistic gender opposition towards a broader understanding of human relationships.

Education strengthens this possibility. Aru joins a computer institute, meets Surekha, a lawyer, and becomes interested in women's activities and the legal profession. She eventually moves towards becoming a lawyer, while her sister Charu is progressing towards medicine. Education consequently becomes one of the mechanisms through which the new generation establishes identity and independence.

5. TIME, MEMORY AND INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The significance of the novel's title extends beyond chronological time. The present cannot be understood without the past. Gopal's family history, Kalyani's experiences, Sumi's marriage and Aru's response to both generations demonstrate how individual lives are shaped by memories and inherited relationships.

The chapter observes that Deshpande blends "Micro-Memory" with "Macro-Memory" and moves beyond the limits of linear time. This narrative method enables the novel to juxtapose personal memory with broader cultural assumptions. The past is not finished; it continues to influence the choices and emotional lives of the present generation.

The three women consequently form a continuum. Kalyani's silence influences Sumi, while Sumi's experience becomes part of Aru's consciousness. Yet the younger generation does not merely repeat the past. Aru questions it. This movement from inherited silence towards conscious questioning constitutes one of the novel's most significant developments.

6. CONCLUSION

A Matter of Time is ultimately a novel about human relationships, but those relationships become meaningful through the experiences of loneliness, silence, memory and self-discovery. Deshpande's achievement lies in refusing to reduce the novel to a conventional story of a deserted wife. Gopal's withdrawal is the immediate crisis, but the deeper subject is the emotional history of a family and the ways in which women negotiate their identities within it.

Kalyani embodies prolonged silence and emotional isolation; Sumi transforms abandonment into an opportunity for self-reliance and creativity; and Aru represents a younger consciousness willing to question inherited assumptions. Their experiences demonstrate a gradual movement from silence towards speech, from dependence towards independence, and from unquestioned tradition towards self-awareness.

The novel's treatment of time strengthens this argument. Personal histories remain active within the present, but the younger generation can reinterpret those histories rather than



merely inherit them. The concluding image of Aru and Kalyani standing together suggests continuity as well as change. Deshpande therefore presents female selfhood not as an isolated achievement but as a continuing process shaped by relationships, memory, suffering and choice.

In this sense, *A Matter of Time* moves beyond the familiar binary of victim and oppressor. It becomes a nuanced exploration of how individuals attempt to live meaningfully within complicated emotional and social worlds. Its enduring significance lies in the recognition that sometimes the most profound transformations begin not with dramatic rebellion, but with the courage to break silence and discover a self beyond inherited expectations.

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