

Cultural Humanism in Shashi Deshpande's A Matter of Time

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural humanism is based on rational and empirical tradition that is followed by our ancients from generation to generation. It includes law, literature, culture, philosophy, politics, social, science, and more. Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with human issues and problems, which grabs the interest of humanity. Her novels are concerned with a woman's quest for self; an exploration into female psyche. Deshpande's women stand at the cross-roads of traditions; they seek some change but within cultural norms.

Deshpande's protagonists are caught in the conflict between responsibility to oneself and conformity to the traditional role of wife. The protagonists of her novels are the objects of cultural/ social oppression and they revolt against family traditions in search of freedom and quest for their 'selves'. She compares her protagonists to the mythical characters like Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, etc.,

How we see ourselves collectively or individually depends Greatly on myths. They are part of the human psyche, part Of our cultural histories. The myths present role models. And images that women are expected to adhere to: 'to be As pure as Sita, as loyal as Draupadi, as beautiful as Laxmi, As bountiful a provider as Annapoorna, as dogged in devotion. As Savitri, as strong as Durga- these are the ultimate role Models we cannot entirely dismiss... The examples are it seems held out only to women. It seems odd that it took us women so Long to realize this truth, to understand why this is so. (85-95)

In the novel, A Matter of Time deals with human predicament, of three women representing three generations of the same family. Deshpande deals with a woman's psyche and the way she is made to feel an inferior being, an unwanted child, and a burden of the family. In this novel Kalyani, Sumi and Aru are portrayed as women who break tradition norms, by which women are trapped, between traditional and modernity.

Kalyani gets married to Shripati. Kalyani's mother, Manorama had failed to beget a male heir to their property. She was afraid that her husband would marry for a second time. So Manorama is opposed to Kalyani marrying into a new family, as the property would then go to them. Due to this, Kalyani married Manorama's brother Shripati just to keep the property within the family. In those days, in forming relationships, importance is given to property than to feelings. This shows the important of social set up of the culture.

Kalyani gives birth to three children Sumi, Premi and Madhav, a mentally retarded child. Kalyani's real tragedy begins when her four-year-old son, Madhav, who is lost at the railway station, while she is to board the train to Bangalore. This tragedy results in Kalyani going back to her mother's house with her two daughters. Shripati doesn't talk to Kalyani for thirty years. Shripati is irresponsible as a father towards his daughters life.

Being a cultured woman, Kalyani teaches her daughters the traditional norms of the society. Shripati comes back to Manorama's house when she is in death bed. Although he obliges, not even a word is exchanged between them. Kalyani sees no difference between her mother's home and husband's house as a state of silence exists between them in both the places. This incident shows the vulnerability of the male-dominated society.

Even when nothing is left of married life between a husband and a wife, women suffer in silence just to maintain peace in their married life. Sumi reflects about Kalyani in the same sense, But her kumkum is intact and she can move in the company of women with the pride of a wife. (167)

Sumi, is different from Indu, Saru, Jaya and Urmila, the women protagonists of Shashi Deshpande's earlier novels. Sumi gets married to Gopal. They also enjoy a harmonious relationship during the early years of their marriage. In their union, she gives birth to three daughters- Aru, Charu and Seema. The commencement of their matrimony was filled with bliss when compared to the other protagonists of Deshpande's novels. At forty years of age, life has cornered her with various agonies and as a consequence of this, she was left all alone and helpless with her teen aged daughters. But Sumi is emotionally strong. She brings up her daughters as they have lived before. Thus, Sumi can be characterized as a responsible mother.

With her three daughters, Sumi finds shelter in the big house 'Vishwas' owned by her mother Kalyani. Sumi's life is filled with vacuum because of Gopal's desertion. She feels, "I can't find my bearings, there are no markers any more to show me which way I should go". But she does not remain a passive mother or as a sufferer, an oppressed and a wronged woman. It shows that Sumi is an exemplary of a traditional and cultural woman than the other protagonists like Rukmani in Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve, Indu in Roots and Shadows and Saru in the Dark holds no Terror.

Sumi wants to stand on her own legs and assert her identity. She looks for a permanent job with a great determination. Though her parents do not consider them as a burden, Sumi decides to move out of her parent's house into an expensive and congested apartment. This shows the strength of will in Sumi. Though she is brave and live courageously in the society, a woman gets respect only if she lives with her husband. Even today the fate of women is being measured only through their marital status. Sumi thinks about her parents, Kalyani and Shripathi who lived like stranger under the same roof and had not spoken for years. Though Sumi behaves like a modern woman she follows her mother's cultural and humanistic value.

Sumi's daughter Aru rebels against her father. She approaches her father not expecting sympathy for her or for her mother. She wants to unravel the strange behaviour of her father. She asks Gopal "Why did you get married at all, Why did you have children?" Aru is disappointed to see the tragedy of her grandmother and mother. Out of frustration she declares 'I'm never going to get married'. As a young and modern girl she conveys her opinion without considering the traditional society.

Thus, the women of Shashi Deshpande is born and brought in Indian tradition and culture. Though the protagonist is educated and influenced by western ideas, they are not at all ready to leave their roots that are in the family setup. She is a woman who is far from being short sighted. She is a woman blessed with a vision of future. In the ultimate analysis, she is a modern Indian woman who is 'reformed' and 'free'. We can say that the feminist approach of Shashi Deshpande with its root in humanism is based on Indian ideology and positively constructive in the Indian social and cultural context.

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