CHAPTER 4
4.1 SUMI'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND SELF AWARENESS

In her recently published book, *A Matter of Time*, Shashi Deshpande, scales new heights. Very Indian in its foundation, the core of the book is built around the question of what a man does when he is disenchanted with the material world. One of the paths such people could take was paved ages ago – nobody knows when actually- when sage Yajnavalkya told his wife, “Maitreyi, verily I am about to go forth from this state (of householder)”-as told in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Such going forth has nothing to do with the wife, her beauty, her youth, or any similar quality of her wifeliness. It also has nothing to do with Vishwas, trust (or the lack of it) a husband/wife has in the other. The need springs from the inside, from recognizing the effervescence of the world around oneself. According to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Maitreyi on hearing that declaration of her husband, discussed with him the reasons for his going away, and argued with him whether that path was also not hers to take. The maiteryi of Brihadaranyaka Upanishad was free to renounce the world, and to go on a spiritual quest of her own. That special moment of Maitreyi’s life forms the ground on which Shashi Deshpande builds her book.

Shashi Deshpande, who has carved a niche for herself in articulating the bitterness and desolation of her women characters in her novels, enters for the first time into a broader arena and grapples with the complex theme of alienation in her novel. Also, for the first time in her career, Deshpande makes a man the protagonist of the novel. But, this does not mean that the novelist totally shifted her focus. A close study of the novel reveals that Deshpande is
deeply concerned as usual with the traumas suffered by women in a middle class family in India. No doubt, the novel begins in a manner, which is deceptively similar to her earlier novels and follows almost the same pattern, but there is something intrinsically different in its theme and presentation.

Shashi Dehpande’s *A Matter Of Time* particularly deals with the theme of the quest for female identity. The complexities of man-woman relationship specially in the context of marriage, the trauma of a disturbed adolescence, the attempt to break traditional moulds in which women are trapped, sexual discrimination, the rejection of the dependency syndrome and introspection are some of the concerns which give the novel a feminist bent.

In *A Matter Of Time*, Deshpande gives an honest account of the abrupt disintegration of Gopal’s happy family and the diverse reactions of all the people concerned. Without any warning, Gopal one day announces to his wife that he is leaving the house for good, Sumi, his wife of twenty years, and their teenaged daughters, Aru, Charu and Seema are caught totally unawares. Sumi retreats into a shocked silence while eighteen-year-old Aru tries bitterly to search for her own reasons for this calamity.

Deshpande, who is an acknowledged master at expressing the anguish and frustrations of women, gives a true-to-life saga of the trauma faced by Sumi. The support of her immediate family—her parents, sister and cousins—comforts her to some extent, cushioning her against the cruelties of life. Unlike the general idea of a deserted wife, Sumi does not crumble to pieces at the pain and humiliation inflicted on her. As soon as she recovers from shock, she picks up the threads of her life and tries to readjust her lifestyle to suit the situation. She moves with her children, into her parents’ house and helps her
children to get on with their lives as before. This monstrous tragedy, so undeserving as we are made to understand, leaves Sumi seemingly unperturbed. But beneath her apparent stoicism is pathos left for the reader to decipher.

Sumi and Gopal’s is not the ordinary arranged marriage. Gopal’s frequent recapitulations allow the reader to share in their discovery of each other. Their joyous intimacy leaves one in no doubt of their compatibility—physical as well as mental. Recounting the rapture of their first physical union, Gopal thinks: “And I knew then that it was for this, this losing yourself in another human being, that men give up their dreams of freedom”1. Their separation, therefore, is all the more poignant. Permi, Sumi’s sister, is filled with a rage “At their carelessness in throwing away what they had, uncaring, it seems to her, of the value of what they have discarded.”(136).

It is evident that there are no obvious reasons for Gopal walking out on his family. This is clearly established by the pathetic probing by Kalyani, Sumi’s mother, who takes it upon herself to plead with her son-in-law to return home. Gopal reassures her that Sumi is not to be blamed for his decision, but does not offer any other convincing reason. Sumi’s sister’s attempt to elicit a reply from her brother-in-law also proves to be futile. On probing, Permi discovers from Aru and Charu that their father had been humiliated by his students in college and had later resigned from his job. However, this does not seem to be a sufficiently concrete reason for his resolution. At times, it appears that even Gopal is not aware of the reasons for this momentous decision he has taken.
Vague references to his past by Gopal reveal that his childhood has not been normal. The fact that his father had married his brother’s widow, and he was born of that union proves to be quite unsettling for Gopal. His adolescent mind draws up several possible reasons for this marriage. And, at one time, struggling with an inner conflict, he even draws a parallel from Hamlet’s predicament:

“It was when I read Hamlet, fortunately much later, that the most terrible version of my parent’s story entered my mind. Just that once, though, for I slammed the door on it immediately. In this story my father became a man succumbing to his passion for his brother’s wife, the woman compliant, a pregnancy and a child to come and then after the husband’s convenient death (no, I couldn’t, I just couldn’t make father poison his brother) a marriage of convenience. (43).

He is never able to relate to his father always thinking of him as his mother’s guilt partner. Later, his parent’s gruesome death leaves a void in his life. But, more than that, it is the realization, that his sister, Sudha, and he did not share the same father, which shattered his equilibrium. As he later reflects, “that was a betrayal that cut away the foundations of my life”. (52). It is obvious, therefore, that Gopal has long been nurturing a sense of loneliness and desolation as evident from his ruminations:

“Emptiness, I realized then, is always waiting for us. The nightmare we most dread, of waking up among total strangers, is one we can never escape. And so it’s a lie, it means nothing, it’s just deceiving ourselves when we say we are not alone. It is the desperation of a drowning person that makes us cling to other humans. All human ties are only a
masquerade some day, some time, the pretence fails us and we have to face the truth. (52)

This line of thinking, which is similar to Sartrean existentialism, progresses towards the more indianised concept of renunciation in the later stages of Gopal’s life. The Hindu tradition identifies four stages in man’s life: *Bramhacharya, Grihashta, Vanaprastha, Sanyasa*. Having experienced *Bramhacharya* and *Grihasha* (bachelorhood and the duties of a householder), respectively, Gopal now moves forward to an experience *Vanaprastha* (the relinquishing of the duties of a householder) that is only a step away from *Sanyasa* (total renunciation).

Apart from a few random recollections of his childhood, Deshpande does not throw any further light on the reasons for Gopal’s renunciation. It is left to the readers to surmise why Gopal chooses to relinquish his duties as a householder. It is not even clear if he has achieved a solution to his problems or has arrived at a greater understanding of himself. It is, however, quite apparent that he has relished every moment of his life as a husband and father. It is a paradox, which shrouds the reasons for his behaviour in ambivalence and mystery.

This aspect of the novel, dealing which Gopal’s renunciation, finds a parallel in Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* where the protagonist, like his namesake Gautama Buddha, abandons his home and family to find a solution to the “enigma of human loneliness and discontent”². The protagonist, Siddhartha, who is endowed with all virtues, goes through various stages in the life to emerge in a final state of peace and holiness. On the road to his destination, nevertheless, he has tasted the enjoyment of being a mendicant
wanderer, the rapture of being a student/consort to a courtesan and the pleasure of being a wealthy man of business. Eventually, sickened by lust and other worldly pleasures, he finds his peace as a companion to a humble ferryman.

For Deshpande’s Gopal, however, the dilemma continues and desertion upsets a number of peripheral characters, apart from the significant character of his wife, Sumi, which again compels the author to stray back into her forte of giving voice to the discontent and frustration of women. Sumi copes quite admirably with the humiliation and disgrace of being a deserted wife. She does not rave and rant but surrounds herself with a deathlike silence. Her very silence, however, conveys her pain more effectively than words can. In a manner quite similar to that of her counterparts, Indu, Saru, Jaya and Urmi, in Deshpande’s earlier novels, Sumi reveals an independent nature. Sumi is proud and defiant. It is clear that she does not want anyone’s pity. The fact that she realizes, that life must go on and she must be strong for the sake of her daughter, is reiterated throughout the novel. Even Aru, who had thought that her mother was indifferent to Gopal’s desertion, realizes after Sumi’s death: “I thought she didn’t care about what papa did, I thought she was uncaring, indifferent, I said angry words to her but I know now that was not true.” (240)

The novel revolves around four generations of women— Manorama, who is now dead but whose absent presence can be felt through her portrait, Kalyani, Sumi, and Aru. When Gopal walks out on her for reasons, which he himself cannot understand, Sumi returns with her three daughters Aru, Charu and Seema to shelter in the Big House where her parents Kalyani and Sripathi live in a strangely oppressive silence. They have not spoken to each other for
thirty-five years. There is a distinct parallel between Sripathi’s desertion of Kalyani and Gopal’s desertion of Sumi. But what is significant is that without the men the women come to their own and show the potential to shed the dependency syndrome. But Gopal’s desertion is not just a tragedy. For Sumi and her daughters it is also a shame and disgrace. There is a social stigma that, they now have to bear. Despite the fact that others think that she takes Gopal’s desertion as a matter of fact Sumi undergoes her own kind of suffering: “It takes time to get used to sharing your life with another person, now I have got used to being alone.” (23)

There is a ruthlessness with which she makes the girls discard things when they vacate their house and decide to live permanently in the Big House. She looks hollow-eyed and drawn after their last night in their own house but Aru finds her mother looking so bright and normal in the morning after her bath, that she cannot but think: “Perhaps things will work out, may be we will be able to go on, even if we can’t go back” (30).

Gopal evokes the reader’s pity for bringing this distress on himself and his family. His description as a loving husband and gentle and caring father dissuade us from laying the blame squarely on his shoulders. According to Subhash K. Jha, “Gopal is not our average cardboard cad but a distressed guilt-ridden husband and after father baffled by his own sudden withdrawal from active domesticity”⁴. Episode from history and mythology bear witness to men who were venerated for their selflessness while no thought was given to the silent and suffering and martyrdom of their wives. Lakshmana’s steadfastness and devotion has no parallel in Indian mythology, while Siddhartha is hailed for spurning the luxury and comfort of princely life in
pursuit of knowledge. Their respective spouses Urmila and Yashodhara, however, remain shadowy figures in the background, doomed to live a life of anonymity and insignificance. While Gopal is not idolized, he is not reproached either for shirking his responsibilities as a husband and father. On the other hand, Sumi is made to suffer the disapproving comments of women like Shanker’s mother: “When are you going back to your husband?” the old woman ask abruptly.

“You should be with him. Look at his state! It’s all right to stay with your parents for a while, but that’s not your home. When my daughters come home, I don’t let them stay long. Go back to your husband, he’s a good man. If you’ve done wrong, he’ll forgive you. And if he has-women shouldn’t have pride.”(161).

Centuries may separate us from the mythical fingers of yore, but even today a women’s worth is measured only through her marital status. This is graphically illustrated in the saga of the marriage of Sumi’s parents, Kalyani and Shripati.

Sumi’s decision to learn to ride the scooter is her first step towards a more independent existence. Aru too tries to be “the man of the family”. She insists on taking her mother to the dentist and tries to “fill the blank Gopal has left”. For a while Aru and Kalyani do not get along very well but very soon Aru realizes that there is something strange in the relationship between her grandparents “Why does Baba never come down? Why doesn’t he ever speak to Kalyani? She is his wife isn’t she? And why is she so frightened of him? Poor Amma, Sumi says. But why? (39).
Sumi tries to persuade Aru to ignore the queer relationship between her grandparents just as she tries to make her forget what Gopal has done:

"Do you want to punish him, Aru? I don't. I'm not interested. I just want to get on with my life. Let him go Aru, just let him go. This is not good for you. (61).

Kalyani and Goda (Kalyani's cousin sister) worry about the fact that Sumi has lost weight but Sumi, "feels that what she has shed is unwanted matter; what now remains is the essential. Her fine boned body (...) feels full of energy" (70). It is as if Sumi has embarked on a journey. Actually Sumi knows why Gopal left her. She always knew that Gopal who always had a fear of commitment and family ties had the potential to walk out on her and the children. So, with all the trauma of being a deserted wife, Sumi is more interested in getting on with her life and finding a meaningful existence. She does not mope or wallow in self-pity. She is willing to let Gopal go his own way just as she must find her own path. Now back in the Big House, she feels like a "parasite" and is keen to get a job. She cannot help but observe that being a daughter is a disadvantage: "She saw it then, the adoration of the male child. It must have been this way in the stable in Bethlehem, in Nanda's house on the banks of the Yamuna in Gokul. The male child belongs (...) (71).

It is when Sumi is out of house hunting and happens to pass the house of the student at whose press Gopal is working and with whom he is living, that she meets Gopal. It is here that in a flash she realizes that Gopal and she must now move on alone and she reconciles herself to their separation:

"We can never be together again. All these days I have been 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 more separately, two different streams”. (85).

Sumi, in time, enters a world of creative writing. Her first attempt, a play entitled ‘The Gardener’s Son’ is a success. This gives her the courage to deal with more daring themes like female sexuality. Sumi also looks at the mythical figure of Surpanakha from a new angle. She is unable to appreciate Rama and Lakshmana’s treatment of Surpanakha:

“She’s as ugly as Surpanakha,” she has heard Kalyani say. And she has been thinking since then of this demon sister of king Ravana, who fell in love with the Aryan prince Rama. An unpleasant story, it’s occurred to her, with the two princes Rama and Lakshmana mocking and ridiculing her and finally mutilating her by cutting off her nose. (191). It makes her reflect:

“Female sexuality. We’re ashamed of owing it; we can’t speak of it, not even to our own selves. 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. Surpanakha, neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it” (191).

Through Sumi and Aru’s eyes we are also made to witness the unfair treatment meted out to women in different spheres of life. Permi’s story about one of her patients, the pregnant wife of an AIDS victim, shocks Sumi and Aru. The callousness of the man marrying, in spite of being aware of his
condition, just so that he would have someone to look after him horrifies them and evokes their pity.

The fact that a Sumi die just as she is about to begin a new life, is a little hard for the reader to reconcile to the death being too abrupt. The revelation about her father’s real vulnerable self, which lay behind the grim, silent, exterior is too brief to be convincing. But Sumi has established her identity and found a meaningful existence before she dies.

The novel *A Matter Of time* moves beyond feminist concerns in that it raises the existentialist question itself. It tries to penetrate and analyse the very predicament of human existence and solve the riddle that is life. The important truth revealed is that self-pity is not the answer. It is only through a process of self-examination and self-searching, through courage and resilience that one can change one’s situation from despair to hope. The most important message conveyed in the novel comes through Gopal’s realization in the end; “If it is indeed true that we are bound to our destinies, that there is no point struggling against them, even then this remains—that we do not submit passively or cravenly, but with dignity and strength” (246).
4.2 KALYANI’S SELF ABNEGATION TO ARU’S POSITIVISM

In the previous section we have seen how Sumi fights to search her own identity after the renunciation of Gopal from his family and strives to establish her own identity. In this chapter we will evaluate the main role of Sumi’s mother and her influence on the lives of Sumi and her daughters.

*A Matter Of Time* is set against the backdrop of the sad tale of Kalyani and Shripati in the ‘Big House’. It is the house to which Sumi returns with Aru, Charu and Seema, when Gopal leaves them. Gopal’s absence from the family scene creates unique tension for the various characters. Each one of them tries to find out Gopal’s reason. Then there is the conjugal relationship between Kalyani and Shripati. The lack of communication between them impinges on the wider issues of patriarchy that influences the successive generations. History has repeated itself in the life of Sumi. But on both occasions Kalyani and Sumi are silent. Kalyani suffers silently. She fears a similar fate to Sumi. Kalyani’s fears are based on patriarchal oppression that condemns women to the margins of silence. She is made to realize that while losing her son, a male heir, she had abandoned her motherhood as well as her right as a wife. Her punishment is that she has to live with this psychic wound. Really it was not her fault. Her predicament is that the woman’s body is not only a text of culture. It is a focus of social control, and the site of violence, exclusion and abuse. In this social construction of body the subject is denied agency and is compelled to accept her passivity. For nearly thirty-five years she remains a second sex, a passive silent sufferer. Her body becomes a ‘site of colonizing power’. Kalyani’s mother in her childhood blamed Kalyani for
not being a son and it is injustice towards females. Kalyani was an intelligent girl and was often playfully told by her father that she would become the country's first engineer. She was, however, not allowed to even complete her schooling and instead was married off to her maternal uncle, Shripati, according to her mother's wishes. Kalyani's mother, Manorma, is obsessed with the fear of her husband taking up another wife as she could not produce a male heir to their property and she does not even relish the idea of Kalyani marrying into new family, as property would then belong to them. Hence she desires that her only child, Kalyani, should marry her brother, Shripati. Such type of consanguineous marriages are quite common in south India where the main intention is to keep the property within the family. In spite of warnings from the medical fraternity about the risk of abnormalities in the products of such unions, these marriages continue to be even to this day. Of Kalyani and Shripati's three children, the last one, who is a boy, is mentally retarded.

Tragedy strikes Kalyani when her four-year-old son gets lost in "that supremely Indian situation, confusion at a railway station" as she is waiting to board the train to Bangalore. Shripati cannot forgive his wife for her negligence and sends her back to her parents' house with her two remaining children, Sumi and Permi. It is only on her death-bed that Manorma is able to prevail upon her brother to return and live in the 'big house' with his wife and daughters. He obliges her but continues to maintain a stony silence with his wife. The enormous cruelty of it, apparently, does not cause as much concern as it would have, if, perhaps, Shripati had forsaken his wife or she had died. On hearing her grandparent's story, Aru is shocked at her grandmother's acceptance of such a life: "And when Kalyani signs her name, carefully,
spelling out ‘Kalyani bai Pandit’, Aru is amazed. How can she still have his name for god’s sake?” (146). At times Sumi too wonders: “But for many others this may well be a sound arrangement where husband and wife are living together under the roof even if there is only silence between them”. Sumi recalls Shanker’s mother’s words “what is a woman without a husband?” (167) Sumi is unable to comprehend the meaning of such an existence. She thinks:

“Is it enough to have a husband, and never mind the fact that he has not looked at your face for years, never mind the fact that he has not spoken to you for decades? Does this wifehood make up for everything, for the deprivation of man’s love, for the feel of his body against yours, the warmth of his breath on your face, the touch of his lips on yours, his hands on your breasts? Kalyani lost all this (had she ever had them?) But her Kumkum is intact and she can move in the company of women with the pride of a wife”. (167).

But it is Kalyani who emerges as the most powerful character in the novel. Hers is a pitiable story, but one of deep endurance and strength. Kalyani seems to have an endless capacity to bear pain. Even Sumi realizes, “Kalyani’s past, which she has contained within herself, careful never to let it spill out, has nevertheless entered into us (...) it has stained our bones” (75).

It is Kalyani who carries within her a sense of history- the Big House to her despite the fact she has had a traumatic past.

Kalyani is a fatalist. She believes in destiny and sees miracles everywhere. The family smile at her stories but, “they don’t seem to realize that the real miracle is Kalyani herself, Kalyani who survived intact in spite of
what Sripati did to her, Kalyani who has survived Manorama’s myriad acts of cruelty” (151).

Manorama emerges as a cruel, insecure woman and ironically, it is she who is a victim and not Kalyani. In fact Kalyani survives victimization and emerges whole and intact. In a world dominated by men and in which marriage and sons are the only things that matter, Manorama is not unable to see the good that is in Kalyani, nor is she able to enjoy her granddaughters, Sumi and Permi. It is this that Kalyani realizes in the end, when she tells Aru:

“For so many years I thought I had nothing (...). My mother didn’t care for my children either. Daughters again, she said. And when you were born, a daughter I wondered how she could have been so blind. Now when I look at you, my three granddaughters, especially at you, I think I am luckier than my mother. She’s the unlucky one who didn’t know how to enjoy her children and grandchildren.”(226).

Aru is a rebel. She rebels against her father. She approaches Gopal 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?” Her searching question makes Gopal re-examine his motives in fleeing from the family. Aru is disappointed to see the tragedy of her grandmother and mother. Out of frustration she declares ‘I’m never going to get married.’ She holds strong views on patriarchy and how women, in general, get victimized as a result of the actions of men. She is critical of Gopal. She wants to see it that Gopal does not go scotfree. Aru meets a feminist, Surekha, a lawyer by profession.
Aru is similarly surprised to learn from her lawyer/activist friend about the totally unfair system, which had been in force in our country since time immemorial until recently. Aru, who plans to sue her father for maintenance, comes to Surekha for help. Surekha tells her: “you’re lucky to be living now. Do you know that Manu does not mention any duty to maintain a daughter? The duty is towards a wife, parents and sons.” (204)

Aru also noticed how the women in the family find no place in the family document held sacred by Kalyani. While the document is full of various characters and their descriptions, there is no mention of the women who undoubtedly had a hand in shaping the family tree. A similar observation is also made by Jaya in That Long Silence who protests against the family tree drawn up by her Ramu Kaka in which there is no trace of the women who have, according to her, played stellar roles in the family.

The deep-rooted desire of every Indian- male or female-to have a son is reiterated by Deshpande in this novel. Her quote from the Upanishad aptly sums up the Indian psyche:

“Whatever wrong has been done by him,
His son frees him from it all:
Therefore he is called a son. By his son
A father stands firm in this world”.

Brahad-Aranyaka Upanishad. (1.5.17).

Ultimately it is with Aru that the novel comes to a full circle. In the beginning of the novel, just after Gopal’s desertion we find Aru in a state of confusion and defiance. She is unable to understand her mother’s quiet indifference or her father’s behaviour. Like a child she only wants to go back
to the same happy, carefree existence, which they had enjoyed as a family. She particularly resents Kalyani’s oppressive love and the way she likes to look after her and her sisters. But gradually Aru matures and becomes more perceptive. Finally, when she hears the story of Kalyani’s past and all that she has borne, she forges a special relationship with her grandmother. It is Aru who articulates the feminist voice in the novel. It is she who questions the injustice against women. Much as she loves Gopal and does not want to lose him she seeks legal help to make Gopal pay (at least financially) for what he has done to Sumi. At the same time Aru is sensitive enough to sympathize with her grandfather. When she thinks of him: “She can’t think of the cruel husband Sripati, only of her grandfather alone in his room, of the way he looks up when she enters (...). And anger ebbs away leaving her flooded with pity. (144).

Aru’s ambiguous feelings leave Sumi worried. Sumi does not want Aru to view every man-woman relationship with suspicion, to see “in every woman a victim and every man a betrayer”. With Kalyani, Aru’s relationship now undergoes a distinct change. For instance, she exclaims over her grandmother’s swollen feet and asks her to show them to a doctor. She gets a basin of water to immerse her feet in and gets her a cup of coffee.

Aru joins a computer class after her exams instead of taking a much-deserved holiday. She also becomes part of a women’s activist group. It is through this group that she meets, Surekha, a lawyer. Through Surekha, Aru will understand something of the separation between her parents and will go on to become a lawyer herself. When the news of Sumi’s death comes, it is
Aru who rushes to Kalyani and kneeling by her huddled body says, “Amma, I’m your daughter, Amma, I’m your son. I’m here with you.” (233).

Through education, determination and an inner strength, the potential for which is revealed only when one suffers, Sumi’s daughters find their voice and establish their identities-Aru as a laywer and Charu, who is already on her way to becoming a doctor. Because of their talents and qualities, two very capable young men, Rohit and Harishi, are already pursuing the girls.

It is because of Aru and Kalyani and the partnership that they have forged, the strength with which they face suffering, that the novel ends on a note of hope. The last image on which the novelist closes her story is not Sumi’s death but Aru and Kalyani standing together at the door and the “smile of encouragement” which they have for Gopal.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha* (New Delhi: Rupa, 1993), Vergo


All subsequent references in parentheses are to this edition of the novel.
