Chapter – IV
The Binding Vine
A Matter of Time
The Binding Vine

Shashi Deshpande’s novel ‘The Binding Vine’ was first published in England in 1993 by Virago Press and the same year it was published by Penguins, India also. In this novel, Deshpande seems to be engaged in a constructive process of consciousness raising. Like her earlier novels it traces the development of the female protagonist, but ‘The Binding Vine’ not only deals with the problems of women, it depicts a widening of the canvas. The protagonists of Shashi Deshpande’s earlier novels had already begun to question their roles, functions, attitudes and even behaviours. ‘The Binding Vine’ is remarkable as it introduces the concept of female bonding – the desire of one woman for feminine bonding and helping other women, who are less fortunate.

In her earlier novels, we find that Deshpande’s heroines have realized that they have to unshackle themselves from the chain of bondages which have chained these women’s rights for centuries. They are aware that the age old societal norms and their preordained roles have subjected them to severe suffocation and humiliation. They finally succeed in knowing about themselves, but only within the limited purview of their own lives. In a way these women have no interest to raise their feelings as modern feminists do, with the capacity to purge society of its evils and blaze forth a trail of glory. Urmila, quite often referred in the novel as Urmi is the protagonist of ‘The Binding Vine’. She is ahead of her predecessors by her endeavours to help other women. She strongly believes that women should have the courage to express themselves and expose the evils of the society fearlessly.
‘The Binding Vine’ is Deshpande’s boldest statement of a woman’s sexuality. It was inspired by a real life incident of rape in Bombay and though it has many themes in it, one of the themes of the novel is “about controlling women’s minds and bodies”. It begins with the life of Urmila, an intelligent, independent, outspoken, middle class woman, who is trying to cope up with the grief of losing her one and a half year daughter, Anu. Just like Akka’s death in ‘Roots and Shadows’, Urmii’s daughter has already died before the novel starts. Taking Urmii as the anchor, Shashi Deshpande has roped in the story of Kalpana and Mira and with them other characters to show the sexual wrongs done to women in patriarchal Indian society. As an American author, feminist and social activist, Gloria Jean Watkins, better known by her pen name bell hooks says:

“Sexism is perpetrated by institutional and social structures, by the individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo.”

She underlines the fact that sexism is most often expressed in the form of male domination which leads to women’s subjugation, discrimination, exploitation and oppression. According to her, male ideology projects that women obtain value only by relating to men because women cannot bond with one another. She exhorts women to live in solidarity, to bond with one another in order to counter male supremacy. Shashi Deshpande’s novel ‘The Binding Vine’ is a novel that can be read as a projection of such ideas as women’s solidarity, female bonding and value of sisterhood in a male dominated culture. The basis for their bonding is
shared oppression and victimization. In Deshpande’s view, when women undertake their journey in pursuit of self knowledge they have a heavy baggage. She says:

“We are already burdened with a baggage that has been given to us. The fact is that we don’t start with a picture of ourselves on a clean slate. Inscribed on it already are things told to us by others that determine our behavior, ideas, expectations and dreams.”

This is a subtle device to weaken women so that the women think as men and accept the male system of values. The consequence of such conditioning results in nurturing misunderstandings about women and among women.

‘The Binding Vine’ presents predominantly the women’s world. The novelist examines the lives of about half a dozen women to demonstrate what drives the women to become hysterical, escapist, sacrificial goats and also discusses the compulsions which compel them to despair in silence. Apart from the patriarchal forces, women too become the cause of female subjugation, suffering and silence. This long silence that had become the hallmark of woman’s existence is broken by Urmila, the protagonist of ‘The Binding Vine’. She is an upper middle class career woman—a lecturer in a college. As pointed earlier, she is also a grieving mother who has recently lost her toddler baby daughter, Anusha and consequently has become highly sensitive to the suffering and despair of others. It is this sensitivity which leads her to befriend the helpless Shakutai, whose daughter Kalpana lies in comatose state in a hospital after being brutally raped. Although they belong to different strata of society, the mutual support and sympathy between Urmila and Shakutai in coming to terms
with each other’s grief is remarkable. It is the same sensitivity, which also makes Urmila delve into the poems of Mira, her long dead mother-in-law and understand the mind of the young Mira who is subjected to marital rape. The novel is in four almost equally divided parts. The dominant theme is that of sorrow caused by the death of Urmila’s daughter Anu, which is introduced in the first part, runs through the middle two parts and ends in the fourth part with the novel itself. This consciousness of the death of the protagonist’s daughter is like a thread in which all other themes are tied up. We are given a peep into the Indian psyche through other characters who in one way or the other share Urmī’s personal loss. Urmila’s agony is balanced with the agony of Mira, the mother of Urmī’s husband Kishore. Mira had been a tender woman with a fiery spirit which was nipped in the bud. She died four years after her marriage in giving birth to Kishore. She expressed the agony of her loveless marriage through her poems which form part of the novel. In fact each of the four parts of the novel opens with short poetical epigraphs taken from the poems of Mira. Along with her mother-in-law’s past suffering is added the suffering of Shakutai and her daughter Kalpana, whose honour is violated by her own relative. The novel ends with Urmī’s decision to fight for the cause of justice to women belonging to various strata of society.

Urmila is an economically independent woman who teaches in a Bombay college and lives with her mother. Yamini, whom she calls Inni. She falls in love with Kishore, her neighbour and herself takes a decision to marry him. Kishore works in the merchant navy and has to be away from home for long spells. Urmila although lives with her mother, but is a self-willed woman who takes her own decision. Her strength is first seen,
when at the age of fifteen, she has the courage to stay alone with her
grand father Aju’s dead body, while Kishore goes to inform the other
members of her family. Again her strength is displayed on the very first
night she passes with her husband Kishore. It borders on militancy when
she walked out of the room just to assert herself as Kishore had entered
the room parodying the popular Hindi film song ‘Two of us in a closed
room and we can’t get out’. She recalls:

“\textit{And I walked out, not just to prove him wrong, though}
\textbf{there was that too, but because of the look on his face}”\textsuperscript{4}

Kishore never asks her why she had walked out that night nor does she
explain, but this action of Urmia brings a chasm between the two, although
Kishore does not express it. She feels that there is something in him she
can never reach because he will never remove his armour.

The past comes as a strong force in the novel. For Urmila, the
death of her daughter is a terrible loss and despite the efforts of her
friends and family members she clings on to her grief. When someone
asks Urmia how many children she has and she replies ‘One’, she feels
guilty in not including her dead daughter Anu. Although she tries to
forget the loss, but she feels that forgetting this loss would tantamount to
betrayal Urmia realizes that had she lost her son, she would not have
responded in that way. S. Indira aptly observes:

\textit{“Like a masochist she clings to her pain and allows her}
\textbf{memories of Anu, every small incident to flood her with}
\textit{longing and a great sense of loss”}\textsuperscript{5}

Urmia is obsessed with the memory of her dear departed daughter and
starts looking into her own life and the lives of other women around her.
In such a despondent mood she comes across a photograph of Mira, her
dead mother-in-law and in the same box she finds some books and a
diary, which make clear that Mira was a good budding poetess. Urmi also
comes to know from Akka, the second wife of her father-in-law that Mira
was spotted at a wedding by Kishore’s father, who fell instantly in love
and contrived to marry her. Mira’s unwillingness to marry a man much
older and her interest in studies are ignored by her parents and other
elders. She died four years later, while giving birth to Kishore, her second
issue. Urmi’s reaction to this knowledge about Mira is:

“To me the story – the way she told it to us - is not so
much about Mira’s marriage, but about the man’s
obsession with her. He saw her at a wedding and fell in
love with her. ......................... Nor could he ask his
parents to propose ........................ so he went at
it dubiously; and it is this, more than anything else, that
gives me a clue to his feelings, his tenacity.”

Urmila’s venture into Mira’s life introduces her to the closely guarded
life of her mother-in-law. Mira being emotionally immature and sensitive
could not accept her husband’s love and obsession that was limited to
sex. The troubled married life of Mira, silently borne by her was an
endless tale of suffering –forced physical molestation and violation. This
can be gauged by the following lines written by Mira:

“But tell me, friend
Did Laxmi too twist brocade tassels
Round her fingers and tremble,
Fearing the coming of the dark-clouded,
Engulfing night”
She realizes that the patriarchal Indian society and its traditions do not acknowledge a woman’s feelings. The frequent invasion of her physical space leaves her wanting to have ‘a room of her own’. It is socially accepted that in marriage a husband has a right over his wife’s body and it is the duty of the wife to satisfy his physical needs, but legally it is termed as marital rape. This traditional negation of a woman’s right over her body and sexuality also forms the theme of Deshpande’s earlier novel ‘The Dark Holds No Terrors’ and the short story ‘The Intrusion’. As Indrani Jaisingh, an eminent lawyer opines:

“It is assumed that by marrying a man, a woman has given her consent to sexual intercourse with her husband at anytime. Thus, even if he forces himself on her, he is not committing an offence (of rape) as her consent is assumed.”

Mira holds her mother responsible for her unhappy lot in marriage, but what could the poor mother do because her own fate was similar to most of the women of the society. Mira feels her body has been invaded by the insensitive husband. She feels as if she is serving her husband in bed like a prostitute. This is further proved by such entries in the diary like:

“But I have my defences;
I give him the facts, nothing more, never my feelings..............
Love: How I take the word.
If this is love, it is a terrible thing.”

The passage like the above suggest the psychological fears and physical suffering of Mira. This suffering of Urmi’s dead mother-in-law, when she
wants to share it with her childhood friend and now her sister-in-law Vanaa. She cannot do this as Vanaa considers it taboo to talk about the sexual life of one’s parents.

Urmila remembers Mira’s poem, which talks about the man who tried to possess another human being:

“Don’t tread paths barred to you
Obey, never utter ‘no’
Submit and your life will be
A paradise, she said and blessed me”¹⁰

It is ironic that such advice is quite often given to young girls by women themselves – their mothers, who have borne a similar fate and they perpetuate male supremacy. A similar advice must have been given to Kamala Das, the famous Indian English poetess, who had symbolically rebelled against all such rigorous and well defined roles. Her poem ‘An Introduction’ is an ample proof:

“Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroider, be cook
........................................................................................................
Be Amy or Be Kamala, or better still, be
Madhavikutty. It’s time to choose a name, a role”¹¹

Kamala Das could revolt against all such authorities and tame them down. She could boldly say:

“Why not leave me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins, everyone of you?”¹²

Mira did not have the same courage. In her poems we don’t find any mention of her family or other relations because she did not feel at home in her new abode. She does not share her loneliness or her trauma with
others. She walls herself like the lady in Kamala Das’s ‘The Sunshine Cat’.

After her marriage, when Mira comes to her in-law’s house, she was rechristened ‘Nirmala’. This is the first estrangement from her own self. She was given a name - Mira by her parents with which she had been familiar since her childhood, but this new name in her new home shatters her personality and threatens her identity. There is a sharp reaction in her—a strong rebellion in her heart. Though overtly she does not protest, but puts down her reaction in the following lines:

“Nirmala, they call, I stand statue-still,
Do you build without erasing the old?
A tablet of rice, a pencil of gold
Can they make me Nirmala? I am Mira”

This strong assertion never becomes public. This becomes an integral part of her inner personality and finds expression only in poems. With the loss of such selfhood, women have to undergo other humiliations as Mira’s diary reveals how Venu, a poet snubs her for writing poetry. He asks her to look after her children and leave writing poems to men. Through her diaries Urmila establishes a communion with Mira and tries to reconstruct the tragic tale of a sprightly girl, who suffered and wrote poems. Through her poems Mira becomes a symbol of female oppression and the poems are like a coded message for a sympathetic peer. Urmi understands that once Mira must have been a favourite of her father who presented her notebooks in which she jotted down the poems. She also understands that Mira must have nurtured a desire to be recognized as a poet but must have been stifled in the prison like atmosphere of her husband’s home.
She also had fear of being laughed at if she expressed herself aloud. She says:

"Huddled in my cocoon, a somnolent silkworm
Will I emerge a beauteous being?
Or will I, suffocating, cease to exist?"\(^{14}\)

Mira’s questioning, anxiety and uncertainty are all felt in her heart and her poems are true reflections of her latent feelings. In the last poem she wrote, Mira seemed to have written the very spasms of near painful joy that kept shooting through her body at the feel of the clinging life within her, the binding vine within which female life is webbed throughout the novel:

"The fish swimming in the ocean of my womb
My body thrills to you,
..............................................................
Desire, says the Buddha, is the cause of grief,
But how escape this cord
This binding vine of love? Fear lies coiled within
This womb-piercing joy"\(^{15}\)

Just like the fragments of Mira’s diaries, the stories of the various incidents also come to us in fractured bits and pieces and not through an ordered narrative. Mira’s writing reflects the extent of forced sexual activity. Perhaps her situation refers the mute suffering of many such unfortunate women.

Mira’s untimely death in child birth ends her cloistered existence with a man she could not love and people she had nothing in common with. The untold experiences of Mira’s life revealed in her poems, disturb Urmī, who identifies Mira’s story with that of Kalpana, a lower middle
class rape victim. Kalpana, a young and attractive girl is the daughter of Shakutai and becomes a victim of Prabhakar's lust. Urmi comes in contact with her and her mother Shakutai in a hospital, where Kalpana is lying in a state of coma and in the process of helping them, she becomes involved in their problem. However from Shakutai’s life Urmi becomes aware of the suppression and ill treatment of women in the lower strata of society.

Shaku came to live with her jobless and homeless husband a year after her marriage. He lived with his cousins and although there was no privacy, Shaku had to satisfy his sexual needs during the night while the day was spent toiling to earn for their three children. Inspite of her submission to a hopeless marriage, Shakutai received a shock when her useless husband leaves her for a younger woman. Urmi realizes the dual standards of society in Shaku’s story – even a good for nothing husband is considered a security by Shaku and the society expects her to keep her marriage. Shaku then turns to her sister Sulu for support, whose husband treats her wife like a servant because she had a skin disease. Prabhakar, Sulu’s husband has an eye on Shaku’s daughter Kalpana. As Sulu could not beget a child, she asks her sister to marry Kalpana to her husband. Sulu’s acceptance to a life of humiliation where she would serve her own niece and husband after their marriage shows her desperation and lack of choice. The women like Sulu have to face all kinds of injustices and exploitation, while men like Prabhakar successfully fulfil their obsessive desires. Kalpana being a modern girl belonging to the lower strata of society ridicules her ‘mausi’ and says that her ‘mausaji’ would be jailed if he marries a second time. When Prabhakar cannot get Kalpana socially, he molests and rapes her and assaults with a heavy object on her head.
She is brought to the hospital in an unconscious state. Deshpande has depicted that the threat of rape looms large on women of all classes. The veteran Indian English novelist Mulk Raj Anand aptly says:

"No woman in our land is beyond the threat of rape, because of the suppressed energies of the male, through the taboos of patriarchy which deny sex before marriage and make male into wanton animals who assault any possible victim when possessed by lust"16

By brushing sex under the carpet, Indian society has suppressed it too long with horrible repercussions. Rape has always been a horrible indignity heaped on women folk by the male species, merely on the strength of brute force. Like Adrienne Rich, the novelist Deshpande too condemns rape as it is not only the violation and brutalization of the body, but of the mind as well.

Kalpana lies in coma in the hospital, where Urmila finds her as she goes there to meet her friend and sister-in-law, Vanaa who works there. Kalpana’s mother Shakuntala or Shakutai thinks that she has met with an accident, but the medical reports confirm that she has been assaulted and raped. Shakutai’s reaction is that of a typical Indian mother bred in an oppressive male dominated society. At first she does not want to accept that it is rape and even when Dr. Bhasker confirms, she asks everybody including the police to register it as a case of accident. Most Indian mothers would react in a similar way as they are concerned about their daughter’s and family honour. Shakutai’s agony, anger, helplessness and fear evoke Urmila’s sympathy and she keeps visiting the hospital. Urmila tries to convince Shaku that the real case should be pursued and the culprit brought to book. Shakuntala instead of appreciating Urmila, initially
opposes her efforts and puts the blame of rape on the victim Kalpana herself. Although she loved her daughter, but Shaku thinks that Kalpana was too secretive and self-willed and dressed attractively. She says:

"Cover yourself decently, I kept telling her, men are like animals. But she went her way. You should have seen her walking out, head in the air caring for nobody. It's all her fault, Urmila, all her fault."\(^{17}\)

This reflects the typical attitude of the male dominated Indian society to put the blame squarely on women. The women like Shaku have been conditioned by patriarchal mindset. Thus a rape victim is doubly victimized. The men are left unbridled and their bestiality is pardoned as an outlet for their libido, while the rape victim is declared to have provoked the rape. Shaku and Kalpana belong to the lower working class, but even the so called educated men in the present age also think similarly. Urmila finds it extremely difficult to convince Shaku that it is not her daughter's fault, but she has values embedded in her by the age old patriarchal social set up. The girls are treated as second grade citizens and strictures have been laid for a girl's speech and conduct so that she doesn't invite men's attention.

Shakuntala does not want a report lodged with the police, as she knows that if she does, a much greater injustice awaits her daughter. A victim of rape is a loser on two counts. First she is a victim of bestiality, secondly the society looks down upon her as a 'kulta' or a characterless woman doubling her misery. Shashi Deshpande further reveals the attitude of the custodians of the society, the police – the manner in which they conduct their investigations. It should be the duty of the police to encourage rape victims to lodge complaints, but the police officer in
Kalpana’s case too supports Shakutai and registers it as a mere accident to the great shock of Dr. Bhaskar. He bursts out in anger and tells Urmila:

“You could see the marks of his fingers on her arms where he had held her down. And there were huge contusions on her thighs – he must have pinned her down with his knees. And her lips bitten and chewed.”

Inspite of all the tell tale signs of rape, Shakutai does not want to lodge a case of rape and the police officer too supports her because in a society governed by Manu’s laws, it is the woman who is considered a bundle of vices and weaknesses. Shaku is also bothered about the marriages of Kalpana and her younger daughter Sandhya becoming a problem if they get negative publicity. Dr. Bhaskar puzzled at the strange behaviour of Shakutai comments:

“Women are astonishing. I think it takes a hell of a lot of courage for a woman like that even to think marriage.”

The doctor wonders how women like Shaku, who themselves have had no peace and happiness in marriage could think of marrying away their daughters. Urmi tells him that marriage provides security, howsoever false, to the concerned woman. Y.S. Sunita Reddy aptly remarks:

“It is indeed an irony that to avoid brutalization of one kind, women willingly submit themselves to a brutality of another kind in the institution of marriage.”

This happens because in a patriarchal social set up, an unmarried woman is socially vulnerable.

Urmila wants justice to be done to Kalpana by bringing the culprit to book. She finds herself a lonely crusader in her fight. Despite opposition from her friend Vanaa and Inni, her own mother, Urmi takes
the matter to the press leading to protests by social activists. She opposes
the move to shift Kalpana to another hospital and gets the case reopened.
With this public outcry, the identity of the culprit is revealed, who is no
other than Prabhakar, the uncle of the victim Kalpana. Sulu, the aunt of
the victim is shocked and cannot bear what her husband has done. She is
a weak woman who is at the mercy of her husband. She can only be a
homemaker and can never resist the wrongs of her husband. She pours
kerosene on herself and dies by burning. This decision of Urmi may be
treated as treacherous by Shakutai, but it focuses on her responsibility as
a social human being. Analysing the condition of women in marriage,
Urmila reviews her own marriage with Kishore. She had gone against her
family and friend, Vana to marry Kishore, but she had walked out on her
first night and gone to sleep in her parents’ house just to prove that
marriage is not a binding. Urmi had wanted their relationship to be built
on companionship and understanding, but Kishore’s job in the merchant
navy disrupts her dream of a normal life. The long separation from
Kishore makes her feel an emotional vacuum and fills her with physical
longing. Her efforts to express these feelings to him are always answered
by Kishore’s passionate love making on his short visits, but Urmi remains
disillusioned and unfulfilled. Urmila remains tough from outside and does
not allow even her mother to know about it. She loves Kishore, but she
rejects his money because she wants emotional support and not financial
support, so she decides to become economically independent. Urmi’s
dissatisfaction leads her to become close to Dr Bhaskar, who as a friend
understands the emotional upheaval through which she is undergoing
after her daughter Anu’s death. Their friendship which gives Urmi the
much needed companionship comes to an end with Bhaskar’s open
declaration of his love for her. Even if Urmil is tempted, she could not uproot herself from her traditional background. Besides, her love for Kishore has a firm hold on her marriage. The amount of hurt and trouble her affair with Bhaskar will cause, also makes her choose the simple and respectful life of fidelity.

Urmil’s rejection of Dr. Bhaskar in favour of Kishore proves that in spite of her dissatisfaction with marriage, she still loves Kishore. Unlike Indu in ‘Roots and Shadows’, Urmil does not give in to temptations to fulfil her physical needs. She is hopeful that her love for Kishore will one day bring down the barriers between them. Instead Urmil takes active interest in helping other women in distress. She objects to Vanaa’s total submission to her husband Harish. Urmil does not like Vanna subordinating herself to the will of Harish in all the matters. Urmil realizes the limitations in choice for women in marriage. Her awareness makes her analyse Akka, her husband’s step mother’s marriage. Akka too had little choice but to marry the husband of dead Mira. Akka had outgrown her marriageable age and so was forced to marry a man who was obsessed with his first wife. So Akka was more a mother of his children than his wife. This novel is a good critique of the pressure and problems women undergo in their lives. Urmil herself remembers the kind of busy schedule she has made for herself because she is a working woman without the support of her spouse. She says:

“I race through my chores in the next one hour—cooking, getting ready for college, looking through my time table, my notes, preparing Kartik’s lunch box. This is how life is for most of us, most of the time, we are absorbed in the
daily routine of living. The main urge is always to survive.”21

It is not only the woman’s point of view but also children’s which is given space in the novel ‘The Binding Vine’ The new role of working woman is not liked by the children because they feel neglected in the absence of their mother form home. This can be seen in the conversation between Urmì’s neice i.e. Vana’s daughter, Mandira and Urmì. The conversation goes like:

“You know, Urmì auntie, when I grow up, I’m never going to leave my children to go to works”
“What will you do?”
“Stay at home and look after them”
“When you grow up, they’ll go away and won’t need you.
What will you do then?”
“Then I’ll go and work”22

The passage shows Mandira’s feelings of being neglected because her mother is a working woman. She dislikes being left to the care of a maid-servant. She thinks that she would feel neglected. This is her wishful thinking that life will be full of happiness by leaving certain opportunities because she does not know the constraints such full time housewives have to undergo in the Indian set up.

Shashi Deshpande attempts at satirizing pseudo feminists like Priti, who are over enthusiastic about fighting for equal rights for women, but have displaced notions about women’s freedom. In a case filed by a husband, the court rules that the husband cannot force the wife into physical relations. While Priti is excited about the judgement, Urmì behaves in a sober manner as she is practical enough to realize that one
judgement by a single judge which can be appealed against will make no
difference to the entire womankind. Like Nayantara Sahgal’s protagonists
– Simrit, of ‘A Day in Shadows’, Saroj of ‘Storm in Chandigarh’ and
Sonali of ‘Rich Like Us’, Urmi too does not exhibit male hatredness. She
has no desire to seek a world without men. Urmi only wishes for a world
where women are treated equal to men. Luckily for her, she finds like
minded male friends, one of them is Dr. Bhaskar to whom Urmi is not
only just a wife of somebody, but an individual with an identity of her
own.

‘The Binding Vine’ seems to be the struggle of several women
characters to get happiness for themselves. Such moments of happiness
are not easily available to these characters. However it is not an
impossible thing for them. Urmi realizes that true love has redemptive
power. Despite her longings and frustrations, Urmi is not a radical
feminist, but converts her own grief into a resolve to help other
unfortunate women. As Indira Nityanandam comments about the novel:

“The Binding Vine is a refreshing change from the first
three novels of Deshpande. Protest comes easily to her
protagonists here and there is less agony in attempting to
change societal roles and attitudes. The hope for Indian
women lies in the happy fact that though here are Miras
and Kalpanas and Shakutais, we also have our Urmis.”

Urmi strongly believes that women should have the courage to express
themselves and expose the evils of the society fearlessly.

Thus ‘The Binding Vine’ is a novel with a unique insight into the
plights of women. The alchemy that results in this novel produces a work
that is not only about rape, but about breaking the silence around it. It is a
novel not only about women suffering in their marriage at the hands of patriarchal forces, but taking the responsibility to face facts, bringing injustice to public attention and honouring women's legacies by destroying the myths that imprison them.
A Matter of Time

Shashi Deshpade’s novel, ‘A Matter of Time’ published in 1996 is like most of her novels an exploration of women’s inner life. Besides dealing with the theme of the quest for a female identity, this novel presents the complexities of man-woman relationships specially in the context of marriage. Like all Deshpande’s novels, in this novel too, the concerns of women are primarily in the context of the family and community. The novel also presents the trauma of the disturbed adolescence, the attempt to break traditional moulds in which women are trapped, sexual discrimination, the rejection of the dependence syndrome and introspection apart from metaphysical and philosophic concerns like freedom.

‘A Matter of Time’ revolves around four generations of women – Manorama, Kalyani, Sumi and Aru, but is remarkable to have Gopal, a man who can be called the protagonist of the novel. It is Gopal, who sets the story in motion and literally speaking the story begins and ends with him. He is perhaps the most fully realized of all Deshpande’s male characters and widens the scope of this novel. As the novelist herself told an interviewer M.D.Riti in 1998:

“I have now reached a point though at which I feel there must be a change in my writing, I do not know what kind of change this will be. One gets stale after a while”\(^1\)

In this novel Shashi Deshpande, who has generally presented the past in first person voice often given to her heroines has given it to Gopal as well as the qualities of reflection and introspection.
As pointed earlier ‘A Matter of Time’ weaves an intricate pattern of family relationship within an extended family spanning across generations. Shashi Deshpande agrees with the veteran critic C.D.Narsimhaiah when the latter remarked that family relationship is a theme on which epic after epic can be written. She boldly declares:

"Undoubtedly my novels are all about family relationship. But, I think, I go beyond that because the relationships which exist within the family are, to an extent, parallel to the relationships which exist between human beings outside .............. when I am writing about the family. It definitely does not limit my canvas.

On the contrary, that is where everything begins."²

In fact Deshpande’s novels present a social world of many complex relationship. Many men and women live together and journey across life in their different age groups, classes and gendered roles. Doubt, anxiety and often a feeling of void of values push characters in her novels to intense self-examination. The women are particularly caught in the process of redefining and rediscovering their own roles, position and relationships within their given social world. The novelist herself said in an interview:

"It is necessary for women to live within relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother you do this and no further, then one become unhappy. This is what I’ve tried to convey in my writing”³

The novelist presents the social reality as it is experienced by women. To present the world of mothers, daughters and wives is also to present indirectly the fathers, sons and husbands – the relation between men and
women and between women themselves. It quite often leads to a clash between tradition and modernity, as reflected in the generation gap and conflict between women. This is why her young heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values.

‘A Matter of Time’ opens with a graphic but somewhat saddening description of the ‘Big House’ named ‘Vishwas’ with roots deep into the historical past. It was built by the ancestors of Kalyani, who had come to Karantaka along with the Marathas. They had the conviction that it would accommodate succeeding generations and so it was still standing looking different amidst the fast changing neighbourhood. The novelist presents the architectural details of the house, where the future action of the novel will be unfolded. The house is the symbol of love, affection, belief and a potent symbol of patriarchy. The novel is divided into three parts. The first is entitled ‘The House’, the second ‘The Family’ and the third ‘The River’ – each part begins with an epigraph from the Upanishads. ‘The House’ begins with an epigraph from the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad: “Maitreyi”, said Yajnavalakya, “verily I am about to go forth from this state (of householder).” The reference is to the third stage of life – householder as given by the Ancients and moving over to the fourth quarter of life, ‘Sanyas’ (renouncer) with the first two being that of a child and student. The epigraph of this part of the novel expresses the desire of seeking immortality which is possible only beyond this world. So Yajnavalakya tells his wife Maitreyi about his prospective desertion of the household and the materialistic world. The novel ‘A Matter of Time’ begins with Gopal, a University teacher deserting his wife Sumi and their three daughters. Aru Charu and Seema without any apparent reason as he does not like his role as a householder any longer.
The second section of the novel ‘The Family’ is also taken from the same Upanishadic text:

“Whatever wrong has been done by him,
His son frees him from it all;
By his son a father stands firm in this world”

The craving for son—a strong symbol of patriarchy hovers over the narrative. The family becomes complete when a son is born, a woman feels fulfilled as the mother of a male child. In this novel, all couples are deprived of son: Vithal Rao and Manorama, Shripati and Kalyani and again Gopal and Sumi. A son is always given more importance than a daughter in a male dominated society. So Manorama considers her daughter Kalyani a failure and hates her. Her birth makes her mother Manorama insecure as she feels that Vithalrao may marry another woman for male heirs. Even Sumi living in modern India has a similar thought flashing her mind that Gopal’s desertion may have something to do with a male heir, although she knows that Gopal is troubled with an existential crisis. Yet the fact that anxiety and doubt crosses her consciousness is in itself a forceful indictment of social preferences.

The third part of the novel, ‘The River’ showing the flow of time is from the Katha – Upanishad where Yama asks Nachiketa not to probe the mystery of death:

“Whatsoever desires are hard to attain
In this world of mortals,
Ask for all those desires at thy will
O Nachiketa, (pray) ask not about death”

Life is a continuous flowing process and it never stops. The death is an inevitable truth of the world, but none realizes it. The people are flowing
in the stream of desires. Yama assures Nachiketa to have all worldly pleasures not easily accessible to human beings, but forbids him to ask about death. Interestingly this part of the novel is full of female achievements – Sumi recognizes her individuality and becomes more self assertive; Kalyani gets back her identity; the grandfather recognizes his granddaughters and learns to interact with them and Aru celebrate her eighteenth birthday. Death claims two lives – the formidable patriarch, Shripati and his daughter Sumi departing together after a road accident. Gopal comes to mourn, but returns again leaving his daughters alone. His eldest daughter Aru tells him that they would be all right and he might go back. This is the river of life and the epigraph highlights Nachiketa’s questioning and not Savitri’s, who too had an equally strong argument with Yama. It is perhaps done by the novelist to show the male-orientation of the culture and society.

The novel opens with Gopal deserting his wife and three daughters, who are then brought to the Big House by Sumi’s father Shripati. The stoical manner in which Sumi reacts to Gopal leaving them is amazing. There is none of the ranting and raving although she becomes blank. The behaviour of Sumi throws others into confusion and they treat her like an invalid. They feel it is not just a tragedy, but also a shame and disgrace on Sumi, who herself behaves in a dignified manner. She accepts her husband’s decision placidly not because she lacks courage to counter him, but because she knows the futility of her opposition. Sumi was aware of his resolve since long and she knows the impossibility of reclaiming him. A closer look at her refusal to react to her husband does not show a passive acceptance of man’s supremacy but a contestation of tradition. It is an irony that a deserted wife has to face social stigma rather
than disgrace clinging to the man, who walks out on his wife and family. Sumi, though badly hurt does not crumble to pieces at the pain and humiliation inflicted on her, but with confidence she focuses on getting on with life. The novelist corroborates this in an interview:

"Sumi's acceptance is not passive. She blacks out the unpleasantness. She has a good opinion of herself, she is more concerned with getting on with life. She does not want pity, she would rather do anything for pride. She distances even her husband."6

Sumi's stoical indifference to her suffering may have made Aru, her eighteen year old daughter angry, but since she had a love marriage with Gopal and remembers the vow they had taken, not to question each other when one felt the need to be free. Thus Sumi, revolts against the traditions which made a woman's happiness dependent on marriage. Her method of resistance is balanced and motivated towards reclaiming her identity. She accepts her husband's decision in silence and returns to her paternal home-The Big House.

The grand house to which Sumi brings her three daughters has a history of conjugal discord born out of issues of patriarchy. Manorama, who is now dead and whose portrait gazes on the inhabitants of this house from the wall was the grandmother of Sumi. She was one of the four daughters of a poor priest. This matriarch of the first generation of the story was beautiful and intelligent being educated in school, the Jamuna Bai Pawar High School for girls. Due to her self assurance, Manorama was married to the rich Vithal Rao. The sudden rise in her status added to her confidence and like Saru's mother in 'The Dark Holds No Terrors' Manorama too ruled over her husband and family. She was very
ambitious, but she grew insecure when she could not produce a male child to the family although Vithal Rao never grudged the birth of his only daughter Kalyani. Yet Manorama conscious of the patriarchal tradition that a husband could leave a woman if she gave only daughters was fearful that her husband may opt for another wife. This colours her life and she considers Kalyani as her failure and ill treats her like Saru’s mother in an earlier novel of the same author. Manorama’s disappointment in her daughter grew with Kalyani’s age as she was only average in looks and intelligence:

“And then, she fulfilled none of the dreams Manorama had for her daughter. Her daughter, she had thought, would be beautiful, accomplished, she would make a brilliant marriage that would be Manorama’s triumph, that would show them, the family ............... Instead there was Kalyani, who could do nothing to please her mother.”

A boy’s interest in Kalyani further infuriates her mother, who in her domineering way discontinues Kalyani’s school going. Manorama, careful about retaining her property and house gets Kalyani married to her own brother Shripati, who was born after Manorama’s marriage and was brought up by the sister. Thus Kalyani is married to her unwilling maternal uncle Shripati – a loveless marriage which was doomed from the beginning.

The family history is repeated again. The couple have two daughters, Sumi and Premi and a mentally retarded son who is lost at the Bombay V.T. station at the age of four years. Since then Shripati rejected his wife remaining indifferent to her. Vithal Rao could not bear this shock
and dies. Manorama accuses Kalyani of killing her husband, but calls Shripati and Kalyani to live with her in the Big House. Manorama also dies after some time and Kalyani tries to lead a normal life with her two daughters despite the unbreakable silence of her husband. She now lives with the pride of a wife with Shripati living in isolation in a room upstairs with hardly any communication with his family except through the bell which he rang whenever he wanted something. As Sumi wonders after years:

"Is it enough to have a husband and never mind the fact that he has never 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 a 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."

In the meantime, Gopal a teacher of History in the University comes to live in the outhouse of the Big House. He falls in love with Sumi and marries her. With the passage of time they have three lovely daughters – Aru, Charu and Seema. They live happily, but all of a sudden Gopal goes out and once again the family history is repeated and the deserted family comes to the Big House. Gopal starts living with Shankar, one of his old students. He is searched and found out by Ramesh, the son of Gopal’s sister, Sudha. Every woman of the family tries her best to persuade Gopal, but there is no effect on him. Sumi also
goes to meet him, but says nothing. Aru, the eldest daughter questions him a lot and warns that he would have to pay them. Sumi knows the real situation and so decides to live alone with her daughter. Usha Bande comments:

"While man (the male) is free to follow the path of autonomy and individuation, woman (the female) is tied down to responsibilities as a moral and psychological imperative ................. Because the traits assigned to woman are care, empathy, affiliation and a sense of responsibility for others, they are expected to cultivate the virtue of tolerance."^9

When Sumi goes to meet Gopal and is alone with him again, she is overcome by desire to re-establish their old relationship. Yet, she realizes that the past months of separation had already brought a distance between them. She perceives an unconscious tension and lack of communication between them. To Sumi, the awareness of the end of their marriage sets in as she feels:

"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 separately, two different streams."^10

Sumi puts her heart and soul into her job and her children and tries her best to live a life of self respect.

Sumi refuses all monetary help from the close relatives. She doesn’t want any sympathy and takes up a teaching job and even goes out
house-hunting. It is only for the sake of her three daughters that she stays in the Big House. She wants to be as self-reliant as possible and so learns how to drive a scooter. After attaining economic independence, Sumi starts writing. She writes a play entitled 'The Gardener’s Son' for school students and a second play 'Surpanakha', where the mythological character has been presented with womanly sympathy. Sumi in this play emerges as a woman who is conscious of the identity and sexuality of women. She questions the denial of these in the patriarchal Indian society. As she says:

“Female sexuality. We are ashamed of owing it, we can’t speak of it, not even to our own selves. But Surpanakha was not, she spoke of our 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 – it is this Surpanakha I’m going to write about.”

So Sumi emerges as strong practical woman with a mind of her own. She tries to bring normalcy in the lives of her children for she wants them to enjoy life and not spite it. Some critics may call Sumi a weak woman, who does not question Gopal, but she is not weak. She realizes that till they were together both she and Gopal enjoyed compatibility and family bliss as Gopal himself recalls later the bliss he experienced, when their marriage was consummated. She in fact wanted to question him:

“I will ask him only one question ............ the question no one has thought of. What is it Gopal, I will ask him, that makes a man in the age of acquisition and possession
walk out on his family and all that he owns? Because and I remember this so clearly, it was you who said that we are shaped by the age we live in, by the society we are part of. How then can you, in this age, a part of the society, turn your back on everything in your life.” 

These thoughts of Sumi show her as a strong woman who questions the traditionally approved Vanaprastha Ashram or the third quarter of life that permits a man to abandon his responsibility of a householder and embark on his call of renunciation. So Sumi is a more self-realized and assured woman than her mother Kalyani.

Kalyani too had been abandoned by her husband Shripati. Although Gopal’s desertion is of a different order than Shripati, still a woman abandoned is a woman abandoned. In those days it meant social stigma and condescension at best for the desired woman. Kalyani brought up her two daughters alone after Shripati severed all relations with her, living a solitary life – a stranger in his own home. Kalyani, a woman rooted in tradition called her husband’s obstinacy her fate, but was happy with the ‘Kumkum’ of a married woman on her forehead. She is the symbol of self sacrificing Indian women of her generation who believe that marriage is the most important thing in a woman’s life. She considers marriage as the only way of being alive, so she is terribly shocked to know of Gopal’s walking away on his wife and children. Kalyani knows the pains of a solitary life, so she is unable to bear the tragedy in her daughter, Sumi’s life and her heart bleeds. Kalyani meets Gopal and to persuade him to return, she apologizes for Sumi’s feigned mistakes. She even calls it her own mistake, although Gopal knows it is nobody’s fault. Kalyani says to Gopal:
“But ............... 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 Gopal, forgive me and don’t punish her for it.”

The women like Kalyani were so much rooted in the male dominated tradition that she asked Gopal’s forgiveness although she knows that Sumi is innocent. Even Manju’s mother-in-law, who belongs to a lower class does not justify Sumi’s action and advises her to return to her husband, whom such women always consider to be on the right side.

As against Sumi’s controlled approach, Kalyani’s strategy is far more formidable in its impenetrable silence. Kalyani is a fatalist and a victim – first of cruelty at the hands of her mother Manorama and after marriage a victim of rejection and indifference of Sharipati, her husband. She resisted her mother with a rock like silence and after rejection by her husband, built a cocoon having Goda, her sister and her daughter Sumi and Permi around her. She is the greatest survivor in the novel, who survives all this ill-treatment. Aru, the eldest daughter of Sumi could not understand this strange relation between her grandparents and had a feeling of revulsion. Aru, the representative of the youngest generation of the Big House is a rebel and the real heroine of the novel. She minutely observes the marriages of Manorama, Kalyani and Sumi. She sees Manorama as domineering, Kalyani as enduring and Sumi as indifferent in marriage. Aru is the most vociferous in her protest against the injustices of the patriarchal system. In Shashi Deshpande’s scheme, it is Kalyani and Aru, who are at the core of the family’s fortunes, they are the fixed points around whom the fluidity of Sumi and Gopal’s relationship finally resolves itself. The grandmother and granddaughter embody the
past and the future, the present, represented by Gopal and Sumi, has already splintered. Yet the past can never be disclaimed as time turns full circle. Aru is not the one to accept things unquestioningly. She is angry with her father, Gopal of deserting them, when they were his responsibility, being economically dependent on him. She threatens to sue him asking for financial support and even consults a lawyer, although she is stopped by Sumi, her mother. At a time when Sumi was displaying great inner strength trying to overcome the crisis, her life is cut short, when she and her father, Shripati die in a road accident. Aru is different from the women of the earlier generations. She is not a sufferer like her mother. As Vimala Rama Rao says:

"[Aru is] an observer, to me she is the focal point. It is through her parents' story that she reaches her grandparents' story. Two different generations standing on the same ground – that is very important to me. Aru is angry with her mother, puzzled with her grandmother."14

Aru does not have faith in any relationship and never wants to get married. She is convinced by the reading of Erica Jong that such human relationships are only futile. She says to Premi:

"I’ve been thinking about marriage a great deal, Premi – mavshi. What’s there in it? I mean, look at Amma and now Sumi .......... what do you get out of it? .......... And look at Godaajji and Bhauji-kaka they’re always scrapping. At their age and after so many years of marriage."15
Aru wonders at her grandmother's concern in finding a good match for her inspite of her own bitter experience in marriage.

Aru appears in the novel as a bold, fearless, self-confident and self-respecting young lady, who struggles with the circumstances. It is with Aru's character 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 two sisters. Aru gradually matures and becomes more perceptive. Finally, when she knows the story of Kalyani's past and all that she has borne, she forges a special relationship with her grandmother. It is she, who questions the injustices against women. Much as she love Gopal and does not want to lose her father, she seeks legal help to make Gopal pay maintenance allowance to Sumi. At the same time Aru becomes sensitive enough to sympathize with her grandfather. Sumi does not want Aru to view every man-woman relationship with suspicion. Aru gets concerned over Kalyani's swollen feet and a cup of coffee. Aru joins a computer class after her exams instead of taking a much deserved holiday. She also becomes part of women's activist group. It is here she meets Surekha, a lawyer and goes on to become a lawyer herself. When the news of Sumi's death comes, Aru says to her grandmother, Kalyani:

"Amma, I'm here, I'm your daughter, Amma, I'm your son. I'm here with you."^{16}
This shows Aru’s maturity and strength as she assures her grandmother Kalyani that she will look after her like a son. When after the death of her mother, Gopal comes to mourn for Sumi, he has to return and Aru happily and strongly asks Gopal to go back as by now she starts understanding the existential drive of her father and assures him that they will take care of themselves. In Shashi Deshpande’s novels, younger girls emerge as self confident and self-assured, almost free from the anxieties of womanhood. It happens because the family structure plays an important role in the change of attitude. They grow up with lesser inhibitions regarding sexuality and womanhood. In ‘A Matter of Time’ we find that through education, determination and an inner strength the potential for which is revealed only when one suffers, Sumi’s daughters find their voice. They establish their identities – Aru as a lawyer and Charu, who is already on her way to becoming a doctor. We see that because of their talents and qualities, the girls are already being pursued by two very capable young men, Rohit and Hrishi.

The novel does more than just narrate a tear soaked tale of suffering and endurance. It subtly shows the difference between the values ascribed to stereotypical male and female traits in which man’s needs take precedence over woman’s needs. It also depicts the many faces of female resistance that make survival possible. On examining the two male characters – Shripati and Gopal we find that both leave the domestic sphere because they cannot cope with life’s commitments. Gopal has an unexplained existential dilemma and leaves behind everything in his quest for self. Shripati locks himself against all communication because of frustration, anger and despair. He forgets or rather does not recognize that the grief of having lost a son is not his
alone, it is his wife Kalyani’s as well. By severing all ties, even speech with her, he tortures her doubly. As pointed earlier Gopal’s character is the first male character to be delineated in detail by Shashi Deshpande. The novelist has given a fair deal to Gopal and is sympathetic towards him, though he is timid by nature. He has a boyish appearance and innocence about him. He seems to be a non-aggressive male, but is surely strong from inside because it is very difficult to live all alone. Gopal is a man of good habits and co-operating nature. He helps Sumi even in child rearing and is such a person, who presents his whole self to a female, not just part of it. He is not a sadist like Manu of ‘The Dark Holds No Terrors’, nor a fraud like Mohan of ‘That Long Silence’, nor a silent follower like Kishore in ‘The Binding Vine’. This is the reason that all the family members and relatives are surprised when he walks out on his wife and children.

Gopal resembles Billy Biswas in Arun Joshi’s novel ‘The Strange Case of Billy Biswas’. Gopal’s desertion seems to be like the desertion of Siddhartha in search of truth of life. Just as Siddhartha had no reason for leaving his beautiful wife Yashodhara, son Rahul and the pleasure – palace of his father Shuddhodhan except internal anguish, similarly Gopal has no apparent reason. He himself says:

“Emptiness, I realized then, is always waiting for us ............... it's just deceiving ourselves when we say we are not alone. ............. All human ties are only a masquerade. Some day, some time, the pretence fails us and we have to face the truth.”

Gopal himself confesses that he is afraid of his inner emptiness. He actually suffers from a loss of faith in life. Gopal wants to find meaning
in his life. He is shocked to find his life a lie and a farce. He tells Premi, quoting Yudhishtira about the greatest wonder in this world:

"You remember the Yaksha's question to Yudhishtira: What is the greatest wonder in this world? And what Yudhishtira's answer was? We see people die and yet we go on as if we are going to live forever. Yes, it's true, that is the greatest marvel this world holds......... The day we face the truth that we too are mortal, it will become difficult, almost impossible to go on. ............ It happened to me. I stopped believing. The miracle failed for me and there was nothing left......... For me there was just emptiness."

Maitreyi, in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, refused property and thus she was quite definite in her purpose of life. For her, immortality is the foremost thing, but everyone of this world cannot be as certain as Maitreyi. Gopal realizes that marriage is not for everyone. He does not have any definite purpose in life and is puzzled by his inner emptiness. In Gopal's opinion, a woman gains her purpose of life when she gives birth to a child, but a man always remains an outsider. Gopal says:

"For a woman, from the moment she is pregnant there is an overriding reason for living, a justification for life that is loudly and emphatically true. A man has to search for it, always and forever."

Gopal inspite of his initial happy married life had always considered himself as an outsider in the household. He confessed to Surekha that he was frightened and so she admires him for his ability to admit his failure as a householder. Gopal's desertion of his family cannot be called
'Sanyas' or renunciation. One has to perform all the duties of the first three stages of life before one takes sanyas, but Gopal has left his family responsibilities unfulfilled. The novel leaves Gopal's character quite open-ended. N. Poovalingam comments on Gopal's decision:

"Gopal's decision to leave his family does not seem to imply the Vedic renunciation or Sanyas. Gopal's abandoning the family is not the result of saturation in the worldly life. His more a withdrawal in pain than a renunciation due to contentment ............... His predicament is more akin to the existentialist's. However, what makes Gopal the most sympathetically portrayed character in the novel is not only the profound disillusionment that he experiences, but also the extraordinary self awareness that he exhibits."

After the death of Sumi, Gopal comes and consoles his daughters, but returns hurriedly. Even after the death of his wife and daughter-in-law, he does not change his decision. Gopal's decision cannot be justified because he makes efforts to fulfil only himself and leaves a lot of his responsibilities on others. Even the Gita gives this important lesson that man should perform his duties for the proper functioning of the society.

In our society, woman is chained everywhere, while man is free. The novel proves this fundamental fact through characters spanning several generations. The fact is that Gopal is an escapist, but a man gets nothing by running away from the relations as well as the world. Had Gopal come back after Sumi's death, it would have been a very simple and natural end of the novel. Meenakshi Mukerjee comments on the novel:
"of the three sections in the novel…… the last one seems the least finished, with many loose threads, hanging, almost like a first draft and certainly untouched by a publisher’s editor"21

In a patriarchal society, the causes of suffering may be different, but the victims are always women. The novelist wants to depict that suffering is their destiny. Sumi suffers and is humiliated by her husband, yet she tries to stand up boldly in this world. All the three generations – Kalyani, Sumi and Aru are the sufferers. Kalyani accepts it as her destiny and sheds tears throughout her life, first for herself and then for her daughter Sumi. The latter accepts her disaster as an event and faces it, while Aru is not a silent sufferer but rebels against the society and asks for maintenance. Thus there is a great change in the characters of the three generation. It is because of Aru and Kalyani and the partnership 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 of Sumi’s death, but of Aru and Kalyani standing together at the door and the encouragement which they have for Gopal. It is only Aru, who will know the meaning of life lived forwards but understood backwards.

A linear unfolding of lives, in Shashi Deshpande’s view is an impossibility. The people don’t live that way and she would be foolhardy as a writer to tell the their stories as if there were a straight progression from start to finish. This device recurs in all her novels, a striking illustrate of Kierkegaardian axiom: ‘Life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards’. Nor can there be one voice in each of her novels, the past is presented in first person, usually by the heroine and the present in the third person. This alternating voice not only makes for
double perspective, it enables the author to tell her story in hindsight. In ‘A Matter of Time’ this first voice is man’s – Gopal, a foil for the women. It is he, who sets the story in motion and literally speaking the story begins and ends with him. The ‘Big House’ has a vital role in the action of the novel and it has been presented almost as a character. The ancestral house, even more than the town or city is central to Deshpande’s novels because it is to this that the women return. The various quotations show the novelist’s philosophical attitude towards life and its problems. The references to both Indian and Western scholars like Vyasa, Bharata, Purandardasa, Shakespeare, Kierkegaard and Camus express Deshpande’s wide range of reading. Her novels prove that a woman is the entire world in herself. If a woman is nothing without a man, the latter is also nothing without the former and when they diverge, the conflict arises. In this world, no one is responsible for our problems as they are from our inside.

Thus ‘A Matter of Time’ upholds dignity and strength in living with the unfathomable, in accepting the inevitable. As Gopal contemplates, when Aru is bidding him farewell:

“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”\textsuperscript{22}

Women are at the centre of Shashi Deshpande’s fictional world. Besides dealing with the theme of quest for a female identity, 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. Just as in
‘That Long Silence’ Shashi Deshpande quoting ‘The Gita’ says that one should make a choice after attaining the knowledge and do according to one’s desire, similarly in ‘A Matter of Time’ she quotes the same source to tell us that the end is not us, it is separate and one must be a mere instrument. The important truth revealed is that self-pity is not the answer. It is only through a process of self-examination and resilience that one can change one’s situation from despair to hope.
Notes and References

The Binding Vine

7. ibid., p.66
10. ibid., p.83
12. ibid.
15. ibid., p.136-137
18. ibid., p.8
19. ibid., p.87
22. ibid., p.72
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5. ibid., p.181
8. ibid., p.167
11. ibid., p.191
12. ibid., p.27
13. ibid., p.47


16. ibid., p.233
17. ibid., p.52
18. ibid., p.133-134
19. ibid., p.68

