

Analysing Sumi's Silence As A Weapon To Reclaim Her Uniqueness And Courage In Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter Of Time*.

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande is a famous contemporary Indian novelist in English. She has immensely depicted the condition of women in the fast-changing socio- economic milieu of India and the conflicts, trials and tribulations they encounter. Her women characters are very sensitive, self- conscious, analysed and creative. They are the normal women struggling to find their own voice. While women are expected to manifest divinity in their daily life, the burden of such expectations becomes a form of oppression for both men and women. In such conflicting situations, women are supposed to be silent. However, Silence in Deshpande's novels becomes an assistant for women to go through a process of self- introspection, self- analysis and self- realization. The present paper proposes to understand this with reference to Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*.

Being quite distinct from other women characters who might have outspokenly objected the injustice done to them, Sumi straightaway resolves to tackle reality and face the facts objectively and silently. However, her silence is not the result of her submissiveness. Rather, it showcases her as a new woman with a whole new level of understanding and self- consciousness. The presenter of the present paper wishes to understand her silence as her weapon that helps her reclaim her uniqueness and evolve as a strong and independent woman by progressively liberating herself from patriarchal and social pressures.

Terminology: contemporary, milieu, oppression, introspection, objectively, submissiveness, uniqueness, self- conscious.

Introduction:**Silence**

Silence when we are walking,
Silence when we think,
Silence is what fills us all,
With a binding eternal link.

Silence in the little children,
Silence in the adults,
Silence wrapping around us all,
Silence pulsing in the walls.

Silence fills this hollow world,
Silence is the choice we make,
Silence is the death of this all,
Silence is our fate.

Okami Kamikaze

What is ‘silence’? Typically, silence is used to convey an abstinence or forbearance from speech or utterance. In other words, silence is the intentional or imposed state of muteness. Silence denotes an inaudible condition or moment of complete stillness. However, it is not just inability to speak, it is sometimes ability to encourage deep thoughts, pondering, reflection, introspection and meditation. While silence is usually seen as the failure to say something or to communicate, and may sometimes be thought of as a weakness, it also can be a tool for the characters who choose to remain quiet.

The female silence in literature has been analysed differently by critics. Women’s silence can be interpreted not just as a symbol of absence and powerlessness due to the limited expression allowed to women in the public eye until the twentieth century but also can be seen as a presence, and as a text, waiting to be read. Many Indian novels have introduced female protagonists who remain quiet even in humiliation, insult and hostile circumstances.

However, the same quietness or stillness sometimes stands as the active strategies of choice and resistance. It is not that they are helpless and do not have any option but to accept the situation, their strategic silence often conveys inner consciousness. Strategic silence can be identified as a voluntary act of self-preservation for women, when they feel that it is better to remain silent than to cause someone else to become angry or disapproving of a particular matter. While confrontation is considered as an expression and strength of the self in Western cultures, in Eastern cultures it is seen as showing one's lack of restraint and self-centredness; qualities which disrupt harmony in a community.

Silence does not necessarily indicate weakness or a lack of power. Gal in her essay 'Between Speech and Silence', maintains that silence 'like any linguistic form, gains different meanings and has different material effects within specific institutional and cultural contexts' (176). In Fulton's view, silence has the potential to convey significance in certain circumstances (65). She believes that strategic silence may be considered as the 'discursive inverse of vocal orality' (66). Strategic silence, as Fulton maintains, exists within the contexts of orality. She further labels this concept as "silent orality", which includes 'print language and speech acts that resist and subvert oppression, or control representations, and substantiate subjectivity'. Fulton further emphasises that strategically employed silence is a form of 'mute demonstration' which can be utilised to affirm or to protest about an issue (66).

All these interpretations are very important to understand Sumi's silence that is employed as a tool to survive in *A Matter of Time*. Instead of seeing her as a passive and submissive wife who has to learn to take care of the responsibility of her daughters, she should be seen as the symbol of resilience, strength and power. In fact, Sumi accepts the changed life conditions in such a stoical way that it seems she was already prepared for it as she herself tells Gopal later when they meet after Gopal's desertion: "Do you remember, Gopal ...? You said that at any time if either of us wanted to be free, the other would let go. ... No handcuffs, you said. And I agreed." (AMOT,221)

Shashi Deshpande:

Women's writing in twentieth century has given voice to the age- old issues of womanhood in India. Their works of art are marked by an uncompromising appeal towards the language and the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women. The Indian women novelists like

Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai highlight the questions faced by women in today's male dominated world as the major theme of their works.

Shashi Deshpande (born 1938) is one of the most acclaimed Indian woman writers and a towering figure who in her various works has depicted the contemporary middle-class women's outer and inner world with rare acumen and insight. A recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, Deshpande has eleven novels and four children's books to her credit. Her realistic and life-like portrayals of the urban educated middle-class Indian women with their suppressed dreams and aspirations, their unavoidable silence and patience and their resilience in the most painful circumstances have highlighted the smothered, frustrated and fettered identity of women in the patriarchal society in her notable novels like *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1989), *A Matter of Time*, (1996) and *The Binding Vine* (2002). With a very comprehensive understanding of the grass-root reality of the tragic life of women, she has sincerely attempted to explore the hidden psyche and consciousness of women caught in the trap of patriarchy. The fact that these women have been fundamentally victimized is underlined in all her writings. She regrets that they have always been socially, emotionally, psychologically, sexually and biologically oppressed and exploited in a male-dominated society. G. S. Amur remarks: "Women's struggle, in the context of contemporary society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and most important of all, as human being, is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer and this appears in all her important stories". (Amur 13). Deshpande clearly signifies that these women should be economically free and independent, and ideologically, mentally, intellectually and emotionally strong. In an interview, Deshpande said: "The point is that the greatest revolution can take place in the mind, all revolutions begin there. How this thinking is translated into action is another thing, it is necessary to walk out, to commit adultery, to divorce, to show defiance or a rejection of tradition . . . But each person takes a decision depending on the circumstances". (Vanamala Vishwanatha).

<http://www.srjis.com/pages/pdfFiles/149916186340%20Dr.%20Tukaram%20S.%20Sawant.pdf>

According to Usha Bande, Shashi Deshpande makes her women protagonists move "towards self-awareness at various levels and finally to an assertion for autonomy and freedom. The

picture that emerges is of a self-reliant, emancipated and happy individual, a person, sexually uninhibited, intelligent, confident and assertive". (Bande 14).

Diana Brydon writes while she attempts to locate the post- colonized approach,

"We colonized form a community, with a common heritage of oppression and a common cause of working towards positive social change. To recognize what we hold in common is not to underestimate our differences, but to provide us with a context for understanding them more clearly". (Brydon, 1989:6)

If one could appreciate the same logic to understand the gender issue in a broad sense, Shashi Deshpande's work may be seen as a search for an authentic feminine discourse in which the community of women with a "common heritage of oppression" tries to understand themselves and also work towards a positive social change. Often called 'feminist' due to the strong female characters she has produced through her novels, Shashi Deshpande clearly stated in an interview with Vanamala Vishwanatha, that she would like to be recognized as humanist instead of feminist:

"..... I want to reach a stage where I can write about human being and not about women in relation to men. I don't believe in having a propagandist or sexist purpose to my writing. If it presents such perspective, it's only a coincidence". Shashi Deshpande describes, in unequivocal terms, her idea of feminism. To a question from an interview, whether she would like to call herself now a feminist, she reacts thus:

"Yes, I would, I am a feminist in the sense that, I think we need to have a world. Which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simone de Beauvoir that the fact that we are human is much more important than our being men and women. I think that's my idea of feminism."

On her own admission what she has been doing in her novels is "charting the inner landscapes of women" (Sebastin, 143), where she provides her women characters a context to understand themselves. Her female protagonists help her reconstruct aspects of women's experience and attempt to give voice to 'muted' ideologies. She consistently explores the nature of the "female world and outlook" and reconstructs "the lost or suppressed records of female experience". She identifies femaleness as a thematic base and traces the subtle shifts

of focus in feminine goals and aspirations. She constructs contexts, representing different facets of the trapped female psyche, and attempts to transcend its boundaries. These narratives function as modes of women's experience underlining its resistance and simultaneously subverting it, which opens up a space where the marginal comes into being and retains its difference.

Sumi's journey and her evolution as a new and independent woman.

Described as "Beautiful, graceful, effortlessly, almost without wanting to, gathering friends around herself" (AMT 104), Sumi -the protagonist in *A Matter of Time* evolves in the journey of her life. This journey includes her marriage, children and desertion by her husband in the course of the novel. The novel begins midway with Gopal, Sumi's husband and the father of three daughters walking out of his marriage with the confrontation of mental torment and anguish towards each member of his family. Sumi doesn't ask Gopal a single question and almost stoically returns to Bangalore with her daughters Aru, Charu and Seema, to her ancestral house. Sumi's silence and refusal to find the justifiable reason for Gopal's act of withdrawal unsettle the three daughters. For her three daughters, her mother Kalyani and all the others Sumi herself is an unsolved puzzle. Sumi's story then incorporates the intricate relationships within her extended family, depicting the lives and struggles of her mother, Kalyani and her daughter, Aru.

In fact, her stoic silence shows her maturity to stay stable in the most difficult situation. Though she doesn't show her anger or uneasiness at any point, her deep and intense restlessness can be sensed through her words: "It takes time to get used to sharing your life with another person, now I have to get used to being alone". (AMOT 23). She is worried about her daughters and their future. Her anxiousness becomes quite clear in her words: "Am I the enemy? Do my daughters blame me for what Gopal has done? Do they think it is my fault? Why can't I talk to them, tell them what I feel, how it was? Why can't I open my heart to them?" (AMOT 23) However, she is determined to accept the changed reality. She doesn't nurture any animosity towards Gopal and even converses with him as though nothing has happened. She gracefully accepts that "Gopal is going his way and I have to go mine" (p.161). She is determined to take up a career which will provide them financial assistance.

Sumi's unbelievable silence and patience stand for her composed state of mind. She shows no sign of pain and distress. Her sense of resilience is amazing. Without squandering her time in

hatred and mudslinging, she looks progressively towards a bright future. There are no signs of anger, irritation or annoyance in Sumi. Her routine, getting out of bed, washing, making tea for all of them, going into her daughters' room, everything remains unchanged and undisturbed. Her daughters find it unusual to see her doing her routine activities without being disturbed by any pain. Her silence, patience and indifference make it difficult for her daughters to understand the seriousness and enormity of what has happened. Realizing that she has to carry out the responsibility both of a mother and a father of the girls, she develops a new habit, the habit "of touching them, holding their hands, smoothing their hair, as if this physical contact is a manifestation of some intense emotion in her". (AMOT 33).

When Kalyani is unwilling to accept any help in the household activities either from Sumi or from her daughters, in a response to Kalyani, who says: "Aru should be studying, Sumi, she should be having fun, she shouldn't be involved with this - this mustard seed of domestic life", (AMOT 36), Sumi readily responds: "And at your age, you shouldn't be burdened with us, either. God knows none of us wants it, but there it is, we're stuck in this situation. So let's make the best of it . . . Amma, if we're going to stay here, and who knows how long it's going to be, you'll have to learn to take everyone's help. If you can't, it's going to be hard on all of us". (AMOT 37).

In complete contrast to her mother, Kalyani, Sumi accepts the new life conditions wholeheartedly. Kalyani's character is a faithful representation of self-sacrificing, loyal, altruistic Indian women of the old generation. While Kalyani is the perfect epitome of self-sacrificing motherhood, her marital life is deprived of all rosiness because of the loss of their four-year-old son at the Bombay railway station. Her husband, her own maternal uncle Shripati, lives like a recluse in the family ceasing all communication with her preferring stay upstairs. Unmindful of the bareness of her personal life, she evinces steadfastness in the traditional belief of marriage as the holy sacrament. As her son-in-law Gopal's desertion of Sumi and their three daughters she pleads with Gopal to return to normal marital togetherness. Her anxiety is that her daughter's life should not end up like hers. She even takes up the blame on herself for Sumi's irresponsibility and cries out. She remembers with pain the futility of her marital life and says, "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 my fault, Gopala forgive me and don't punish her for it". (AMOT-47) Without breaking the boundaries and within the

confines of family, she exemplifies through her life the familial harmony emerging through a woman's patience.

Aru, the vibrant representative of the younger generation, is endowed with an innate sense of order. Sumi has no feeling of bitterness for her husband. But it is difficult for her daughters, especially for Aru, to forget what her father has done to them. She does not want even her mother to forget it. She wants her mother to consult the lawyer and to do something against him. Sumi does not agree with her. She just laughs and says: "Gopal has outsmarted the law. He's given us all that he had. And he has nothing now, not even a proper job . . . So what can the law make him do? . . . 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". (AMOT 61). Aru, on the contrary, wants him to realize what he has done and to punish him. Sumi wants to go on with her life with her daughters without thinking of Gopal. Aru has a deep sense of bitterness for her father, who, she feels, is responsible for their sense of loss and displacement, for their shame and disgrace. During her visit to him, she calls him a callous father, a cruel husband and an unfeeling man. She expresses her anger and hatred in a question that she asks: "Why did you get married at all, why did you have children?" (AMOT 62). She doesn't want Gopal to get away 'scot-free' by just walking away.

Thus, when compared with Kalyani and Aru, Sumi is a completely different woman, who exercises silence at every point to learn every situation better and then handle it in the best possible manner. She in fact is worried about Aru. She asks her not to have the burden of other people's actions on herself. Seeing Aru totally devastated at Gopal's desertion as she says, "There is no family left. We are five separate individuals, all of us going our different ways, five units that don't add up to a whole". (AMOT 184); Sumi consoles her with Lord Krishna's advice to Arjuna on the battlefield: 'Be thou only the instrument, Arjuna'. In fact, Sumi knows that Aru is bold and courageous enough not to be affected by these adverse circumstances and that she is capable enough to take charge of her life. And Sumi's assumption is correct. Though being anguished by the disintegration of the family, Aru doesn't crumple under the pressure; instead, she stands firmly footed ascertaining her self-respect. Even after the untimely demise of her mother and grandfather, she shows an unparallel mental strength in handling situations. She moves away from her father's arm and

tells him “Yes, papa, you go, we’ll be all right, we’ll be quite all right. Don’t worry about us.” (AMOT246)

Sumi has pride and self- respect to understand: “I must move out of the house. I must look for a house for my daughters and myself. I can’t go on living here”. (AMOT 76). She says to her father: “I have no right to be here. I feel a parasite . . . You don’t know how easy it is to become a parasite . . . I’m looking for a job, Baba, I have some money right now . . . And don’t worry, if I need any money, I will ask you. But living here free, I think I can make what we have lost quite a while”. (AMOT 71-72). Her words reflect her self-respect, sense of dignity and determination. She has the courage to comfort Gopal when they meet first time after he left them: “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”. (AMOT 85).

Conclusion:

Though Gopal’s desertion proves out to be an unexpected crisis in Sumi’s life, it gives her a chance to prove her inner strength and potentiality. With self- trust, self- confidence and self- respect she avoids discussion over Gopal’s act of walking away and accepts the new challenges of life. Sumi’s decision to learn to ride the scooter indicates that she is confident enough to live her life all by herself. “She begins all by herself . . .Aru is there to help her the next day. But it is not long before she dispenses with all help and rides it herself, going in circles round the pond, slowly, ready to put her foot down the moment she feels unsure of her balance. . . The next day, Sumi suddenly gathers speed and in a burst of confidence, goes out of the gate . . . Aru is anxious too; she wanders to the gate and waits there until Sumi returns and runs back in after her. Sumi stops and holds both her arms above her head in a triumphant gesture”. (AMOT 33-34). Her experience of learning to ride the scooter proves that she is, to the surprise of her family members, exceptionally confident, strongly determined and fully prepared to live her life with her daughters on her own.

Instead of eloquently opposing her husband, marriage or society, Sumi silently acts to cope with the changed circumstances. Though being the foremost and final victim of Gopal’s desertion, Sumi proves herself to be a woman of courage, confidence, determination, dignity, responsibility, self-sufficiency and self-fulfilment by looking after her daughters even in the

absence of her husband. She may even be accused of insensitivity and indifference. But indeed, she is only concerned with getting on with life, without allowing herself to be bogged in self-pity. She is forced to exercise in indomitable will to survive, which sprouts the creative fervour in her. She writes a play entitled *The Gardener's Son* and proposes to write another.

Sumi's silence helps her to progressively liberate herself from the patriarchal and social pressures. Her quick decisions of vacating the house, learning to drive a scooter, looking for a new house, taking up a job and then even writing a play after Gopal's desertion showcase her as the strong and confident lady who takes charge of her life. Significance of her resolve lies in her attempts to decolonize the patriarchy: she refuses to fit herself in the age-old picture of women who can't take decisions of their lives and who feel scared of the new circumstances. In fact, her act of writing a play signifies the fact that she is strong and stable enough to drive energy to produce a piece of literature. Her decision to stay quiet helps her save a lot of energy and gather strength to survive in the changed circumstances. There is an inner maturity in her ability to respect Gopal's decision to walk out on her. It is enough for her to understand that they cannot get along; she does not find it necessary to question him any further or impose herself on him. Even in crisis, she can leave the impression of her "grace and courage" and her old vivacity (AMOT.172).

Gopal feels an attraction towards her by the end of the novel which again showcases the grace and dignity with which she has handled the crisis in her life. Even though she meets with an accident, her daughters would surely learn to be on their own because quietly she has taught them to find way even in the most hostile circumstances. Thus, *A Matter of Time* is the portrayal of Sumi's psychological journey of selfhood, resilience and courage, in which her biggest tool is silence. She uses silence as a weapon to quietly repossess her individuality and evolve as a strong and independent woman by progressively liberating herself from patriarchal and social pressures reclaiming her Uniqueness and Courage.

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