Violating Cultural and Gender Conventions in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Abstract

This study discusses *A Matter of Time* the novel by Shashi Deshpande, and how it deftly subverts established gender and cultural standards in Indian society. The work provides Deshpande's audacious challenge to traditional societal expectations and her empowering portrayal of female protagonists spanning generations, namely Manorama, Kalyani, Sumi, and Aru, using a thorough analysis including narrative techniques, character evolution, and thematic exploration. The story bravely addresses controversial topics including patriarchy, arranged marriages, domestic abuse, and the changing position of women in a changing society. The findings demonstrate how *A Matter of Time* serves as a powerful critique of social restrictions by offering different perspectives on gender roles and standard practices. In its conclusion, this study demonstrates how Deshpande's novel questions established gender and cultural norms while simultaneously acting as a spark for critical debate on these subjects.

Keywords: Subversion, Gender roles, Cultural norms, Indian society.

Introduction

The gripping novel *A Matter of Time* (1996) by Shashi Deshpande questions and subverts racial and social expectations. The story explores the complex connections within an extended family that pans three generations including Manorama Kalyani's mother, Sumi Kalyani's daughter, and Aru Sumi's daughter. The first generation of women, Manorama, who believes that she would have found fulfillment if she had been able to give birth to a son for her husband instead of a female child "Kalyani, who could do nothing that pleased her mother" (151) and as a result, her husband has not spoken to her for 35 years (Kale, 2019). Every character in the novel is tied to Gopal and Sumi in some way even though the story is told from their perspectives, yet Aru, their daughter "a few days before her seventeenth birthday, wakes up to the knowledge that her father has walked out on them" (10) and her mother's lack of concern for the issue, is the primary character of the novel (Patil, 2017). Aru's journey takes shape as she negotiates the complexities of her familial ties and comes across unforeseen connections that will ultimately influence the trajectory of her life (Gauri, 2021). Through portraying Kalyani's Character Deshpande questions conventional ideas of permanence and stability through the fluidity of time, the silences and broken relationships within families and also explores the idea that time is fluid and intuitive rather than linear and fixed.

Reimagining women's roles and challenging societal expectations

In keeping with the aforesaid Indian female authors, Shashi Deshpande's works feature strong female characters. Her female protagonists are shown as being resilient, wise, and autonomous thinkers. She addresses the constraints and limitations placed on women by society through the character of Sumi in the novel *A Matter of Time* (1996) "The momentary desire to rebel, to be by her, not to follow her grandfather meekly at his beckoning, leaves her" (11). She is shown as a woman who is constrained by the expectations of her gender stereotyping and is required to carry out the responsibilities of a wife and mother. She is keen to forge her own identity nevertheless, as she longs for more than just household duties. In the traditional culture portrayed in the story, she defies expectations by pursuing a profession in writing. Deshpande also questions gender norms by delving into the nuanced dynamics of family life. She depicts the hardships and disputes that result from rigid gender norms and expectations within families. The repressive cultural attitudes regarding Indian women and their subordination within the patriarchal system are reflected in Narayan's portrayal of women (Nur, 2017). Rigid gender norms and cultural standards continue to have an impact on how women are portrayed in India today. Uma Narayan underlines the difficulties experienced by women who are required to uphold conventional duties in order to maintain their cultural identity at home in her study on Indian immigrant households in Britain (Quintana, 2009). In addition to preventing women from realizing their full potential and goals, this subordination strengthens patriarchal norms and beliefs in Indian culture. The education system, where gender disparity still exists, shows the impact of patriarchal standards on women's positions in Indian society (Mukarram et al, 2018). Due to gender stereotypes, how men and women are portrayed in the media is a problem that needs to be addressed (Jere, 2014).

Unveiling gender and religious taboos in the novel's cultural fabric

Significant impediments prevent women in India from pursuing higher education and professional employment due to patriarchal traditions and norms of society (Pal and Mondal, 2022). Although the fact that there are more women than ever in higher learning in the workforce in India, they have yet to reach the highest levels of management (Haldar et al, 2020). This can be ascribed to workplace discrimination, which restricts women's prospects for monetary independence and career advancement (Andari et al, 2023). Gender-based disparities in wages, barriers to obtaining leadership positions, and implicit prejudices in favor of male employees are just a few of these behaviors and viewpoints. In India, women's autonomy and equality are further constrained by social and communal responsibilities, in addition to societal and cultural ones (Haldar et al, 2020). The resources accessible to women in terms of education and employment prospects in India are substantially impacted by the country's social and cultural background, which is characterized by patriarchal standards and gender inequity (Chatterjee and Vanneman, 2022). Patriarchal standards influence the positions of women and control within Indian society as well as their chances for education and employment possibilities (Shah and Subramanyam, 2021). Additionally, India's male-dominated culture upholds the idea that women are fundamentally inferior to men, which results in systemic discrimination and marginalization of women (Goel et al, 2022). It is essential to question patriarchal conventions, advance gender equality in every field to give women equal opportunity and, foster inclusive workplace environments that foster women's success in order to address these problems.

The novel challenges the idea that women should restrict themselves to the domestic realm by showing female characters that defy social norms and pursue their own objectives. It illustrates how those who question these norms may encounter opposition, hostility, and even exclusion from their communities. The story challenges these customs and social standards in an effort to get readers to think critically about the limitations that apply to their own lives and explore other options. By portraying female characters in *The Dark Room* R.K Narayan confronts patriarchal norms and beliefs that are pervasive in Indian society and provides a detailed analysis of the complicated dynamics and difficulties experienced by women (1938). It examines how these norms can constrain their options and constrict their freedom of action, but it also demonstrates how these women move around and oppose such limitations, demonstrating resiliency and fortitude in the face of difficulty. In *The Vendor of Sweets* gender and power are portrayed, paying particular attention to the experiences of the text's female protagonists in relation to their families, communities, and cultural expectations (1967). By highlighting the ways in which gender interacts with family dynamics, societal constraints, and cultural expectations, she contends that the novel both reflects and criticizes patriarchal norms and beliefs. Additionally, feminist critiques of how women are portrayed in the global South contend that there has been a change in how these young girls are portrayed. They contend that there is a marked discrepancy between how South Asian women were portrayed in colonial past and how they are portrayed in media narratives now. These criticisms contend that the current

portrayals of young women in the developing world as development agents serve the needs of global capital because they promote them as hardworking and productive neoliberal subjects (Wilson, 2019). The narratives are meant to provoke critical thought about the necessity of gender equality and the deconstruction of patriarchal practices.

Metamorphosing identities: reactions to cultural challenges in the novel

The struggles that Deshpande's female characters go through in *A Matter of Time* have a big influence on which they are. The protagonists must continuously balance their own goals and objectives with those set forth by the people around them. As a result they have to balance the competing responsibilities of being a wife, mother, and an individual while also juggling the tension between tradition and modernity. The characters' reactions to these difficulties show how their sense of self is developing. Sumi's character exemplifies tenacity and willpower as she ignores social pressure to be married and follows her own aspirations of becoming a writer. "This is the first thing in my life I think that I've got for myself" (230). Aru defies conventional expectations and displays the strength and perseverance of women by taking on the role of the family's son. "I'm your daughter, Amma, I'm your son" (244). "Kalyani is forever speaking of miracles" (151) wields power by being silent. "I think-I'm luckier than my mother. She is the unlucky one who didn't know how to enjoy her children and grandchildren" (226-227). The female characters navigate among accepted norms and their own aspirations in response to the pressures they experience, ultimately testing and reinventing their identities. Indian film portrayals of women have frequently come under fire for supporting patriarchal standards and promoting stereotypes. However, there are several language movies in India that aim to thoughtfully and impartially portray neglected women characters on the big screen (Kamble, 2023). Additionally, by portraying women as docile housewives and objects of desire, Indian television programs support the upkeep of gender stereotypes (Kapoor et al, 2017) Indian cinema is incredibly important in influencing how society views underprivileged women. There have been initiatives to give underprivileged women agency and to question social conventions, but there is still a long way to go in terms of developing realistic and inclusive representations that combat stereotypes and advance gender equality. A few attempts have been made in recent years in Bollywood to recast Muslim female roles as the "new age girl," who rejects traditional social standards and celebrates her individualism (Hussein and Hussain, 2015). Furthermore, it is important to recognize the impact of popular culture, including movies and television, on how leaders are portrayed (Syed and Tariq, 2017). Filmmakers, television producers, and other media professionals must take the initiative in questioning and changing these depictions in order to combat these damaging prejudices and advance gender parity (Behm-Morawitz et al, 2016).

Relevance of evolving cultural norms

Women's representation in literature is essential for confronting and analyzing gender stereotypes and power structures. *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan sheds light on the restrictions and limitations placed on women in society. She contends that there was no room for women to develop their own identities or achieve personal pleasure outside of their responsibilities as partners and mothers. As a result, a lot of women felt stagnant and unsatisfied, which led to what Friedan called "the problem that has no name."(50). Deshpande gives female characters a platform to reject prevailing gender preconceptions and demonstrate their tenacity, resiliency, and autonomy. These female characters encourage readers to oppose patriarchal conventions and attitudes that restrict women's agency and autonomy via their hardships and journeys. The novel provides a fresh look at the everyday lives and encounters of women while also helping to displace feminism's challenges to patriarchy by featuring female characters that confront, negotiate, and reconstruct pre-existing boundaries of gender identities. Instead of concentrating just on communal change to overcome the current gender stratification, the example of these characters inspire readers to believe in the possibility of personal progress in female lives through the examples of strong, independent heroines (Wing-Fai, 2015). Aru, the novel's main heroine, learns about her own inner power and fortitude, ultimately breaking the socially prescribed gender stereotypes. Her journey in the novel serves as a potent illustration of how women may defy and overcome expectations. It's not about being a man or a woman; it's about being a responsible person who can take initiative and make choices without being constrained by their gender. This text offers a compelling story that challenges gender preconceptions by featuring a female character.

Conclusion

This study emphasize the demand for a society that is more accepting and equal, where women are free to express their power and reinvent their selves without being constrained by social norms. Overall this paper provides a platform for female characters to contest, negotiate, and reconstruct pre-existing definitions of gender identities (Anuar and Asl, 2022). This novel supports a larger feminist movement that attempts to rethink gender norms and subvert the dominant discourse on gender by rewriting cultural narratives and establishing alternative discourse spaces (Henderson, 1995). Additionally, it emphasizes the need for a society that is more equal and inclusive, where women are free to exercise their agency and redefine their identities without being constrained by conventional norms. In addition to offering alternate readings of literature that are viewed as pro-patriarchal, this novel critiques the current definitions of gender identities. It deviates from the conventional wisdom and contests the dominant worldview that the novel is said to have replicated (Tukachinsky, 2008). The interest female readers have shown in these novel further highlights how literature has the power to affect and change gender norms and power structures (Taringa, 2019). This work of literature reworks cultural narratives and establishes new discourse spaces, challenging the hegemonic portrayal of gender from "elsewhere" in the world.

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