

# A MATTER OF TIME: GOPAL, SANNYASI OR ESCAPIST

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**Abstract:** *A Matter of Time* is a novel presenting three generations under one roof of *The Big House* which is inherited to Shripati, the husband of Kalyani, by his mother in law cum sister Manorama who begot no male child. Kalyani and Shripati have been living a life of strangeness after the missing of their mentally retarded son. Kalyani's elder daughter Sumi married Gopal, a university teacher and had three daughters Aru, Charu and Seema. Suddenly, one evening Gopal declares his renunciation and leaves his family which is considered by many Sannyasa. After his desertion, the family moves back to *The Big House* where living at, Kalyani, Sumi and Aru present three generations respectively. The novel discusses the relations between three generations, between husband and wife and between parents and offsprings. Sumi bears Gopal's desertion calmly yet broken inwardly. Everyone tries to convince Gopal to come back to domestic life but gets disappointed in return.

**Key words-** Sannyasa, desertion, past, escape,

The novel *A Matter of Time* came from the pen of Shashi Deshpande in 1996. She is the daughter of famous Kannada dramatist Shiriranga. Born in 1938 in Dharwad, graduated from Mumbai, she moved back to Bangalore where she gained a degree in law. After marriage she dedicated herself fully to the family. For a short period, she worked as a journalist. It was 1970 when she started her career of writer with the publication of children book. Now she has four books for children, eleven novels, a number of short story collections and a book of essays to her credit. She has been awarded Sahitya Academi Award in 1990 for her novel *That Long Silence* and Padma Shri in 2009 and worked on Sahitya Academy also.

In Shashi deshpande's novel *A Matter of Time* Gopal, the only leading male character is shown a philosophical mind person. To him the world appears to be a place without certainty. This realization leads him to think about sannyasa. He declares his renunciation to family life but seeing him disjointed, his wife Sumi gives no reaction leaving everything to him and he like Gautam Buddha, walks out his family, his job and everything else. His act of desertion is considered sannyasa by many. Sannyasa is ages old tradition in India. The Vedas describe four ashrams i.e.stages of human life - Brahmcharya (student life), Grihastya (family life), Vanprastha (retired life) and Sannyasa . Sannyasa is 'a stage of renunciation, ahimsa (non-violence), peaceful and simple life and spiritual pursuit.' It is the last stage of human life when everything relating to this world becomes irrelevant and meaningless and only the pursuit of spirituality is conceivable.

Gopal working as university professor had faced his student agitation against his article and this made him realize, "I could no longer stand in a position of authority before my students." (p.27) His feeling helped him to take decision of resigning. The incident stirred his turbulent self which was lie deep in his psyche. Earlier his parents' past had broken him and he suffered his first breakdown. Leaving his sister Sudha, he visited his birthplace Shivpur which had been left by his father with indignation and disgust after his marriage with his brother's widow. With the feeling of hollowness and remorse, he decided to live and study in Shivpur. After completing study, he came Bangalore, joined the job of professor in the university and became tenant at 'Big House', where attracted by Sumi's gaiety, he regained his faith in life again. In spite of her parents' alienation to each other and fearing sister Premi, Sumi lives enthusiastically spreading charm around her. Sumi's spirit revived Gopal's hope. He suppressed his fear in the depth of his conscience. He married Sumi and from then has been living a happy life with her and their three daughters. But the university incident, once again stirred his fear of loss. So he deserts everything and chooses a life of seclusion.

Leaving everything behind, Gopal comes to live at his pupil Shanker's place and begins to work in his press, now he considers his sannyasa complete," The noise and bustle in the courtyard do not disturb me; they have nothing to do with me." (p.43) But it is just an outward reaction as he never finds himself free from the memories of the past and desires. A sannyasi is needed "*Tasmattvmihmandriyanyadou niyamy ...papmanam prajahi hyenam gyanvigyananashnam.*" (First subdue the senses and kill determinedly this desire, the heinous destroyer of both spiritual and physical knowledge.) Struggle of thoughts go on in his inner self. He assumes his nephew Ramesh's questions about desertion and he himself tries to rationalize by saying that he realised a weakness or 'a virus' (p.41) within himself which made him incapable of performing his duties as a husband, as father and as a human being. He confesses "I stopped believing in the life I was leading, suddenly it seemed unreal to me and I know I could not go on." (p.41) Brooding over his past, once more his thoughts hovers around Sumi. After demurring his relation with his sister Sudha, that he considered complicating his life, he is attracted to Sumi like Dushyant to Sakuntala. After years now he realizes "I had only lost myself in that beautiful, dense foliage." (p.45) He repenting on his action, moans, "Is there to be no end to it even after death? Was a man to be tied to his duties forever? Could he never free?" (45) At the time of his renunciation, a song was playing on TV, '*Jeena yahan marna yahan iske siva jana kaha.*' Unknowingly he is influenced. His thoughts go against the rule of sannyasa that Lord Krishna told Arjun, '*Matrasparshastu Kontay shitoshnsukh-du:khda:/ Aagmapyinonityastantitikshasv Bharat.*' (There are sensations of heat and cold, and of pain and pleasure, O son of Kunti, as senses meet their objects, bear them patiently, O Bharat, because they have a beginning and an end and are transient.)<sup>3</sup> When Sumi's mother Kalyani comes to him to find out the reason, he discloses that she had done no wrong to him. As a responsible person, he accepts it was he who wronged her and that he took decision thinking everything properly. He tries to act as an indifferent person yet Aru's moving from him creates a sense of loss like a physical pain. He wants to disclose her, "I was frightened of emptiness within me. I was frightened of what I could do to us, to all of you with that emptiness inside me. That is the real reason why I walked away from Sumi, from you and your sisters....the fear was always there in me, submerged for a time in my absorption with Sumi and my children." (pp.50-51) He is far away

from his family, yet it remains the centre of his all consideration. But as a sannyasi, Gopal is needed to "*kshudram hridayaurbalyam tyaktvottisth* (stand up and drive away this disgraceful weakness of heart.)

In his stream of conscious, Gopal rewinds the incident about his sister Sudha. When he decided to live in Shivpur, she persuaded him to accompany her to Bombay. His rejection aggrieved her. After her departure, he found unable to move back to hotel room as it might remind him of Sudha's sorrow. For the first time fear of grief and loss ravished his mind. This feeling became strong when he witnessed Sudha's plight after the death of her husband PK. Sudha remained genial throughout her life, retreated from every relation after the death of PK. It was a deep shock to him because this made him realise the hollowness of relations and instability of happiness. Coming back to present, he realises everyone has to suffer emptiness in one's life and all relations are masquerade that will prove false one day. Like Gautam Buddha, he feels himself sunken into the mire of corporeity. In spite of desertion, he is unable to detach himself from everything. According to him "Only the creator is free, only the creator can be free because he is out of it all." (55) He has never been able to immune against body enchantment. He shows his surprise why saints renounce body which connects to the world. He does not conceal even his love for Sumi's body as well as their children's. He recalls the discussion between two strangers that helped him in taking the decision of marriage with Sumi as hearing them he accepted the demand of his body and his attraction for Sumi which he had been realizing since Sumi came to his room. Though he asked her to go back, the thought was like death. After the birth of their first baby Aru, he realised a magic circle between mother and baby and found himself alienated. This aroused the feeling of loss within himself for the second time after Sudha's matter. After two years, at the time of his visit to his old friend Hegde, he was fascinated with the charm of Sumi so excessively that on that night he drowned himself in Sumi completely considering himself very close to the mystery i.e. otherness of himself feeling the same joy as was felt by Purandaradasa in his Lord Vithala. Physical and materialistic love is not comparable with spiritual enchantment. The person who drowns himself with Supreme Soul, never fears loss instead he begins to realise oneness in everything. Contrary the person having physical love suffers fear of loss all the time. It happened to Gopal also, as the cry of their baby Aru takes Sumi away from him and he thought the bliss is momentary. He begins to brood "The body shrinks from annihilation-Camus is right when he says this. But there is no choice. The life of body has to end."(p.69) His thoughts waver as he says, "The bliss is only for a moment .We can never possess it. It touches us and goes on, it is never our. (p.89) and "marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes a lifetime of commitment is not possible for all of us."(p.69)

He imagines myriad selves locked in Sumi though it is relevant in his own case. In his self assumed banishment, his thoughts wander around Sumi, her beauty and charms and their family. He fails to relieve himself from past enchantment completely, which is against sannyasa. As a student of history, he believed truth lie at the end to be revealed but later he changes his views and accepts, 'that we have a very complex relationship with the past' (p.100) and, "own history - yes that is where the problem lies "(p.100) After his meeting with Surekha, the advocate from Aru's side, he reassess the relation with past and cries "Your past come back to confront you, thus does it claim you. It's a fool's game trying to escape. But if I cannot escape my past, how will my children ever be free of me. I thought I had snapped the thread when I walked out, I thought there was nothing left to connect us, but...."(218)

Discussing with Sumi's sister Premi, he recalls the myth from Mahabharat where Yaksha ask questions to Yudhishthir about the greatest wonder of the world. Yudhishthir'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, it's the miracle. In fact it's the secret of life itself. We know it's all there, the pain and suffering, old age, loneliness and death, but we think, somehow we believe that it's not for us. The day we stop believing in this untruth, the day we face the truth that we too are mortal, that this is our fate as well, it will become difficult, almost impossible to go on"(p.133-134)

He confesses that he has lost his faith in this false miracle of life and now world is empty for him. But it is not true, in fact his fear of losing his dears to death make him retreat from life. He is compelled to mourn at Sumi's death. At the time of immersing her ashes in river Alaknanda, he meditates, "How ephemeral it is, not just human lives, but the grief and the mourning of the living. Everything passes, nothing remains."(237) Soothing his daughter Aru, piercing pain he feels, "This is what I wanted to avoid, this is what I had hoped to escape." While sannyasa leads to the faith *ya anam veti hantaaram yashchainam manyate hatam/ Ubhou tau na vijaneeto nayam hanti na hanyate//* (He who regards the Self as the slayer and he who regards him as the slain are both unaware of his real nature, for he neither kills nor can he be killed.) And the person who accepts sannyasa "...will come to see that the world is the perennial miracle which the soul worketh, and be less astonished at particular wonders; he will learn that there is no profane history; that all history is sacred; that the universe is represented in an atom, in a moment of time, he will weave no longer a spotted life of shred and patches, but he will live with a divine unity. He will cease from what is base and frivolous in his life and be content with all places and with any service he can render. He will calmly front the morrow in the negligency of that trust which carries God with it and so hath already the whole future in the bottom of the heart"

Gopal emerges as the most strong character because the whole novel revolves around his act of desertion which is considered sannyasa, and its aftermath. Physically he has detached himself from family, relations and past but not from the memory of the past and fear of loss. His inner conflict displays his philosophical temperament but not that of sannyasi. He asses backward and forward the terrestrial happenings but fails to defeat mundane thoughts as well as to achieve the pure stage of sannyasa. Sannyasa demands complete devotion to soul and Super soul leaving everything else behind. Gopal never reaches to the stage of *prasannatma na shochati na kankshati*. (serene-tempered man...neither grieving over nor hankering after anything) He is not fearless which is the very first quality of sannyasi, *Abhayam sattvanshuddhirgyanyogavyavasthitih* (fearlessness, inner purity, steadfastness of yog for knowledge).Gopal's renunciation, when evaluated from this stand point of view, appears to be skin deep and a beginner's attempt to attain a kind of self knowledge. Viewing over the all actions of Gopal, it becomes evident that he is neither a sannyasi nor a karmyogi. Sometimes he appears to be an escapist who is afraid not of responsibility but of past, of future and death. Unlike Gautam Buddha, he failed to remove his fear and to be compassionate with whole humanity. His actions and past concerning proves him an escapist.

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