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Role of Memory in the articulation of Identity in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Abstract

Abstract: According to Elaine Showalter, 'self discovery' and 'a search for identity' is the main theme of women's literature. Postcolonial women like women in India do not only have to suffer because of patriarchal domination but also due to the cultural and social factors which further add to their miseries. Women suffer not only physically but also endure psychological violence. In Shashi Deshpande's fiction, we get the galaxy of silent women who embrace intolerable sufferings for survival and yet struggle to articulate their self and establish an identity of their own. This paper based on the study of Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* (1996) looks at the role of violence and memory which leads the heroine to recapitulate the past memories for re-understanding her relations with her parents, husband and daughters but ultimately results in her articulation of her identity.

Keywords: Memory, suffering, silence, quest, violence, identity.

Oscar Wilde in his novel *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1998) retorts "Memory... is the diary that we all carry about with us" (57). Like a shadow, memories follow a person wherever he/she goes or whatever he/she does. In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "memory" is defined as "a thought of something that you [person] remember from the past" (959). Hence memory can be an episode, image, incidence, or experience that a person remembers from the past. Saint Augustine in his *Confessions* (398 AD) compares memory to "a large and boundless chamber" where images "are with an admirable swiftness caught up, and stored as it were in wondrous cabinets, and thence wonderfully by the act of remembering, brought forth" (212-13). He likens memory to a storehouse where all the past impressions are stored and these impressions are brought back by the person through an act of recalling. Memory is not a mere recalling of the past but is a re-interpretation of the past in the present. Dan McAdams also remarks, "Certain events



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from our past take on extraordinary meaning over time as their significance in the overall story of our lives and times come to be known” (295). Our past events might not hold any significance for us when they take place but the person realises its worth when he gets a new version of his/her past by recalling those memories.

Women’s writings reflect the role played by memory in the lives of women and how these memories help them in forging their own individual identity: “It is an alluring voice, undulating, carrying the current of a roar that reminds them of who they have been in the past, but it is also a comforting voice of a woman...” (Vera 62). Memory acts like a voice that speaks to woman about her own self in the past and at the same time, provides her a relief that how she has progressed from her past.

Women are considered as the weaker sex as compared to men. They are the victims of violence, both physical and psychological at the hands of their male counterparts. Their identity is suppressed under the patriarchal domination. Therefore, women must exhort themselves to seek an identity of their own. According to Elaine Showalter, “a search for identity” is the main theme of women’s writing since 1920s. And memory plays an important role in the articulation of identity in women’s literature. Even Mary Wollstonecraft in *The Female Reader* (1789) recommends that a woman should learn to “exercise the memory and form the judgement at the same time...” (xii-xiii). By an act of remembering, she will form an altogether different opinion of her past and her judgement regarding her memory of the past will be useful to her in the present. Women writers through the memories of the women characters in their works resurrect the self with “a transcendent survivalist aesthetic that speaks to women’s ability to overcome male oppression by whatever means necessary” (Morrison 98). The accustomed women suffer silently the injustice done to them by the male-oriented society. Their traditional values do not provide them with a voice to speak for themselves. Thus, their recollection of past memories acts as a means for looking at their sufferings in the past and encourages them to search for their own identity in the society.

Shashi Deshpande’s *A Matter of Time* (1996) also reflects the role played by memory in the articulation of an identity of Sumi, a leading character in the novel. Anita Singh also remarks that *A Matter of Time* “deals with the theme of quest for a female identity” (112-13). *A Matter of Time*



opens with Sumi watching TV when she is suddenly interrupted by Gopal who informs her about his decision to walk out on her:

‘I want to talk to you,’ he says and abruptly begins. And she sits and listens in silence to what he has to say to her... The telling of what he has come to say takes him so little time that when he has done, the song is still going on. He looks at her for a reaction, but she is gazing at him just as expectantly, waiting for him to go on. The realization that there is nothing more to be said—by either of them—comes to them almost simultaneously and he goes out as quietly as he had come in. (MT 8-9)

The memories of the background song ‘*jeena yahan, marna yahan,*’ on TV makes her comprehend that “this world is all we have and therefore there is nowhere else for us to go” (9). She decides to confront this world bravely and therefore straightaway accepts his decision. She feigns to be calm and stoic from outside as she knows that she is the only support for her daughters but from inside, she was suffering and therefore becomes a victim of psychological violence. After his departure, “it seems impossible that she can ever sleep” (29).

She leaves her marital home and returns to her parental home along with her three daughters, Aru, Charu and Seema. However, in her natal house, she feels unhappy to see the unstable relationship of her parents, Kalyani and Shripati who are living under the same roof without any communication. Shripati, her father, ceases to have any interaction with her mother Kalyani and confines himself to a room when she loses their mentally retarded son at the railway station. By pondering over the past memories of her mother and her own, Sumi resolves to live alone and create an identity of her own: “Self-continuity depends wholly on memory, recalling past experiences links us with our earlier selves, how different we may since have become” (Lowenthal 197). Her reminiscence of the past provides her a link between her past and present and helps her to live her life independently. Therefore, she takes up a job as a teacher and becomes economically independent.

A Matter of Time presents how Sumi gains an understanding of herself by memorising the past memories associated with Gopal. Dorothee Birke says “By comparing our present with the selves we remember, we experience ourselves as being in time— an experience which is crucial for



our sense of self” (2). She differentiates herself from her mother by recollecting the past impressions of her mother which are replete with her silent suffering. After her desertion by her husband, she feels helpless but is unable to articulate her feelings to anyone because she feels that “to expose oneself... to the gaze of all, is perhaps to seek to survive, but through a perpetual suicide” (Blanchot 64). She wanted to live a life with dignity. Therefore, she does not want to be pitied by exposing her emotions to anyone and to ask for help from anyone. She behaves normally to help her daughters in going on with their lives. Her daughters are perplexed by Sumi’s behaviour. Everyone in the house probes for the reason behind her husband’s departure: “They keep pulling things out of past, each memory like a grappling hook bringing up a question- was it because of this?” (MT 17). But she pretends herself unaffected by their talks as “for the picture she pretends to the world is one of grace and courage, to be admired rather than pitied” (172). She wanted to be admired as a graceful and courageous woman rather than becoming an object of self-pity.

She memorises the moments she has spent with Gopal in the past which helps her to gain an understanding of him. She recollects his talks which she interprets as the hints that he was surely going to desert her. In the past, he once explained her about the concept of *sa-hridhay*: “It’s two hearts beating. They can never beat in such unison that there’s only one sound” (24). These strange talks of Gopal would fascinate her but now she does not find them interesting. However, she does not hold him responsible for the “shame and a disgrace” (13) brought on her but accepts his decision because she has realised at this point that the reason for her desertion by him is he himself: “While the others are trying to find reasons for what he has done, she knows that the reason lies inside him, the reason is *him*” (24).

Sumi has decided to leave Gopal and her marital house forever. Her marital house is a storehouse of the past memories which give her both pain and hope that Gopal will return one day: “As long as the house is theirs, they still have a home and the hope that Gopal will return... To give up the house, as Sumi is saying they have to do, is to pronounce the death sentence of that hope” (28). As Andreas Huyssen explains, “the same space cannot possibly have two different contents. But... [it] may well put two different things in one place: memories of what there was before, imagined alternatives to what there is” (1). While vacating the house, the past scenes come forth



such as Gopal coming out of the bathroom and singing, Aru tackling with the cockroach wildly, Gopal saying 'Shaabash' to Seema, Aru and Charu playing chess etc. For Sumi, leaving her marital house means separation of her life from Gopal's life as the "lost space is tied to lost time" (Huat 7).

In her parental home, all their belongings were stored in the small room: "This room becomes a place of refuge to the girls, a kind of recreation of their home" (MT 32). Now they feel like a part of this house. They no longer feel like visitors. Everyone managed to settle in the natal home except Sumi "who has the air of being lost, of having no place in her childhood home" (MT 33). She feels lost because she finds herself struggling between her childhood memories and the present circumstances: "when with the benefit of hindsight one begins to search one's past for... 'turning points', one is apt to start seeing them everywhere" (Ishiguro 175). She sees the image of her mother, Kalyani outside her father's room, "standing before the closed door, banging on it with her open palms, shrieking out something... all the sounds fading away, finally leaving a silence" and "the child going down swiftly... thinking— I didn't see it, I saw nothing, nothing happened" (MT 74). As a child, she has seen her mother lying there. She suddenly thinks "Kalyani's past, which she has contained within herself, careful never to let it spill out, has nevertheless entered into us... it has stained our bones" (75). She keeps on pondering over her mother's endurance of the sufferings bestowed on her but feels happy to see that Kalyani is no longer a "hysterical, self-punishing woman" (184). She has come out of her confinement and has engaged herself with her granddaughters. She observes that "her mother seems to have finally come out of the room she had inhabited in her childhood... a room that in her memory was always dark" (184).

Sumi realises the change in her daughters "each pursuing her own activity" (59). She sees that her daughters have adapted to live in the house the way she lived during her childhood. She "has an odd feeling that the house is accepting them, like it did Kalyani and her daughters all those years back, making them part of itself" (59). When she finds that the unstable relationship between her parents is affecting her daughters, she starts searching for a house of her own. This is her first step in establishing an identity of her own.

While examining the small room where Gopal dwells after deserting her, she remembers the



Purandaradasa song that Gopal used to sing:

...like a bird that flies in,
Perches in the courtyard
And then flies away
the very same instant.
So should one live. (59)

She connects his room to the room in the outhouse where he resided before their marriage. She realises that he is going on with his life like he did as a bachelor. He is not affected by his separation from her. This recollection of the song makes her feel that they “can never be together again... his life has moved on, it will go on without me. So has mine” (85). She decides to go on with her life. She even considers her weight loss as necessary for the change in her: “what she has shed is unwanted matter; what now remains is the essential” (70). According to her, the change that is taking place in her physically and psychologically is indicative of the change in her attitude towards her life. This change allowed her to think of herself as an individual. She decides to take up a job of a teacher instead of depending on others. She “has turned resolutely away from even her immediate past, she is preparing herself for the future, for the job which she is soon to start on” (122). After looking at her past memories, she starts her life anew by doing something for her own self.

While gardening, Sumi discovers the talent hidden inside her. Her remembrance of the story of the Princess and the tree whose “characters seem to come out of her childhood into the present, bringing their story with them” (156). She decides to write a play ‘The Gardener’s son’ for the inter-school play competition for her school. Her memory of the story that she has heard in her childhood helps her in finding a creative writer in her. She then decides to deal with the more daring themes like female sexuality. She decides to write the story of Surpanakha, “a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it” from a different perspective. She thinks Surpanakha unique in contrast to the women of her age: “Female sexuality. We’re ashamed of owning it, we can’t speak of it, not even to our own selves” (191).

She visits Gopal and reminds him of the night she came to his room when they had decided



to marry. She reminds him of the words he had said on that day that “at any time if either of us wanted to be free, the other would let go. We are not going to be tied” (221). Though she did not understand the meaning, she agreed with him. However, when she moved back to her parents’ house, she was frightened to see the change in her mother: “It seemed like something being repeated” (222). She was scared that she will meet the same fate like her mother. But she decides not to suffer like her mother. She gives Gopal the freedom from the conjugal bond so that she can go on with her life autonomously. She informs him about her new job in Devgiri and her plan to shift there with Seema. She remembers her “saying the same sentence when, as a girl, she had stealthily visited Gopal in his room... the look on Gopal’s face that he is thinking of it too, that they are, after a very long while, sharing a memory” (224). This memory highlighted her transformation into the same independent girl as she used to be before her marriage.

When she informs her daughters about her job, they object on her decision to which she remarks “This is the first thing in my life I think that I’ve got for myself” (230). Though she unfortunately dies in the end but she has found her own identity before her death when she proudly says “I’m getting my own place... a room” (231).

A Matter of Time exemplifies the importance of memory in the life of Sumi in creating her own identity. Her reminiscences helped her in understanding the peculiarity of her parent’s relation which effectively resulted in her understanding of her own self. Memory of the past events helped her to overcome loss and to define her identity. For Sumi, memory offered a catharsis through which she looked at her past and found a meaning of her life.

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