

A matter of time



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A Matter of Time By Shashi Deshpande. Feminist Press at the CUNY, 1999.
Reviewed by Sudha S. Balagopal I first read a A Matter of Time a few years ago, when it was published in India. The book made a deep impression on me, with its sensitive story of rebuilding and hope. After its more recent release in the US, I read it again, enjoying it even more. Very few books can lay claim to that fact for me. In A Matter of Time, a father, named Gopal, with three almost-grown girls, decides he has had enough of marriage and its binding ties, and walks out on his family.

In a culture where marriage, to many, is the be-all and end-all of existence, where responsibilities outweigh desires, this expression to be free of all bondage in itself is strange and different to say the least (unless of course, it is for spiritual reasons). Sumi, Gopal's wife, and his three daughters, seek shelter with her parents. Coincidentally, Sumi's parents themselves have a relationship that is more than strained. They are husband and wife in name only, inhabiting the same house with virtually no communication between the two of them. The three girls, Aru, Charu and Seema are bewildered and adrift.

They all want normalcy. But what is normalcy once a father has walked out on his family? Sumi, the mother, is extraordinarily collected, to the point of indifference. How they learn to cope with this dislocation is the story that Deshpande spins for her readers. Of course this is not the only story-it is also the story of all the families that are intimately linked to Sumi's. The one problem I had with A Matter of Time was the abrupt introduction of characters. Deshpande does not describe how some of the people are related to the main character as they come into the picture.

In the beginning, I had a problem sorting out the various relationships. And in this I do not mean the central family of Sumi, Gopal and their three daughters. It is all the other family members: the cousins, their children, Gopal's nephew and his wife and their children, the grandparents' tenants and a host of others. It is said in India that when you marry a man you marry his whole family. It is the same with Deshpande's book, where the reader is forced to accept Sumi and her entire clan, including the complex network of her relatives and well-wishers.

That fact apart, Deshpande's characters develop as you read on. The inner workings of a family are examined so clearly, making me see my own family in many parts of the book. The book is also a mirror of a society in transition. The change in Indian society is skillfully elaborated through the different generations in this book; the grandmother Kalyani who is not really educated, Sumi who is educated but doesn't work outside the home, Sumi's sister Premi who is a successful doctor, and the young girls Aru, Charu and Seema, who all aspire for careers and independence.

The old and the new co-exist in a family that is modern, but with certain old values. With a style that is lilting and gentle, Deshpande draws us into an intricate web of family relationships, without passing judgement on any other characters' deeds. For the reader, however, there is no escaping the clutches of emotion or feeling.