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**The Victimizer as a Victim: A Study of Male Characters in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors, That Long Silence, and A Matter of Time***

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**Abstract:**

Shashi Deshpande is a versatile writer who delves deep into the intricacies of human relationships, especially those concerned with gender dynamics. Although her novels mainly focus on women's experiences, emphasizing their challenges, dreams, and societal limitations, the depiction of men in her writings is also important. The present paper explores Deshpande's presentation of male characters neither as enemies nor as sidelined figures. She depicts that they, too, are victims of patriarchal expectations, and they also suffer because of societal pressures to execute their misogynistic powers. Their choices and actions are defined by compulsions to conform to society, and they are yet to muster the courage to break off the shackles of the traditional view of masculinity. The male characters Manu, Mohan, and Gopal in the novels The Dark Holds No Terrors, That Long Silence, and A Matter of Time, respectively, have been analyzed to unveil their position where they are at the receiving end despite being the perpetrators of victimization of women. These three men are presented from an interesting prism through which they can be seen grappling with an identity crisis trapped in the throes of patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Gender-dynamics, patriarchy, masculinity, supportive, societal.

**Introduction:**

Gender dynamics has been an indisputable forte of the celebrated writer Shashi Deshpande. She has written fourteen novels, four essays, and numerous short stories since 1980. Almost all these fictional and philosophical writings present the position of Indian women as victims of the throttling patriarchal system. She weaves her narratives around the struggles and turmoil of women trapped to act in a particular

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way expected of them by their patriarchal surroundings. In the process, their personal desire to grow, groom and flourish to establish their independent identity is thrown to winds. Deshpande depicts the anguish and impasse of liberal and accomplished females struggling to break the shackles of conventions and moving towards independence and self-expression. However, while exploring the position of women, Deshpande does not overlook the plight of men who fail to offer support to women and instead become suppressive and exploitative. They hang in a limbo between choosing an action that is in conformation with societal expectations and their inability to choose the right action. Deshpande carefully crafts many of her male characters to depict this aspect of the male dilemma. She does not ignore them under the garb of feministic animosity; rather, she unveils such human beings who struggle with their years of conditioning to the misogynistic roles assigned to them. Eventually, the reader gets an opportunity to see real men with human complexities as they perform the roles of fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, and lovers, facing challenges and obligations unique to their gender.

The year 1980 saw the publication of Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terror*. *That Long Silence* was published in 1988, and *A Matter of Time* in 1996. Deshpande was decorated with the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1990 for her novel *That Long Silence*. This novel was also awarded the Nanjangud Thirumalamba Prize. Deshpande was honored with the coveted Padmashree in 2009. *The Dark Holds No Terror* has been translated into Russian and German languages. Deshpande's entire oeuvre has often been studied from a feministic perspective, and it has been accepted that her idea of feminism does not promote an upheaval of the social order. Rather, she believes that the religious, cultural, and psychological factors that foster the subjugation of females have been determined by men and are inscribed deeply on the slates of minds. Myths, for example, observes Deshpande, "condition our ideas so greatly that often it is difficult to disentangle the reality of what we perceive from what we learn of ourselves through them. Our behavior is often and to a great extent dictated by them... myths continue to be reference points for people in their daily lives, and we have so internalized them that they are a part of our psyche, part of our personal, religious, and Indian identity" (Deshpande, WFTM 88). It is this conditioning that hinders human effort to explore different possibilities for dealing with relationships. Both men and women refrain from treading the unfamiliar terrain, and hence, suppression, exploitation, and every form of discrimination continue to flourish despite economic and technological advancements.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* is the story of a defiant young woman, Saru, who tries to break social and familial norms to assert her true self. She had an insecure and lonely childhood that shaped her into a rebellious, angry, and diffident woman who is also strong-willed. *That Long Silence* emphasizes the 'silence' that Jaya, the

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principal character, wishes to break. She embarks on a quest for 'self'. In this novel, Deshpande focuses on the man-woman relationship objectively and does not throw the entire blame on men for the subjugation of women. *A Matter of Time* deals with the multifarious problems encountered by three women representing three generations of the same family. In all these novels, the women suffer owing to victimization by the men around them. But Deshpande is neither anti-male nor anti-establishment as she narrates the plight of these women. That is why her women attempt to resolve issues within the framework of conventionality. They do not break away or break from traditions but simply assert their identities through their actions. All her women evolve as one moves from novel to novel and reaches the milestones set by the 'New Woman'. Manu, husband of the female protagonist Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, reveals his anxiety at his inability to perform responsibility as a father when he says: "I had imagined that to have a child of your own would be one of life's greatest experiences. Now I can only think of the price of baby food and baby powder" (DHNT 143). He feels pressured to perform the expected role as a breadwinner and provider. He tries to hide his vulnerability under the garb of aggression. Men, in real life, too, are seen taking refuge under aggression instead of humbly accepting the lack of their potential to stand up to the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal systems. Manu again becomes a potent agent of misogynistic ideals when he acts under the impulse of values imbibed from the masculinity-centered society and culture that denies sovereignty to women. When Saru gets recognition as a doctor after an accident in a factory in the neighborhood, people start coming to her for medical aid. They show respect for her and ignore Manu. These things hurt his ego and lead to a breach in their conjugal relationship. K.K. Sunalini observes: "Her rapid academic and social climb evokes an inferiority complex in Manohar. The unhealthy male ego poisons his mind. The lover in him dies. He is metamorphosed into a mean, loathsome individual" (71). The disparity of achievement leaves him thoroughly insecure. Even Saru is aware of this:

When we walked out of our room, there were nods and smiles, murmured greetings, and *namastes*. But they were all for me, only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored... And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller, made him inches shorter. He had been the young man, and I was his bride. But now I was the lady doctor, and he was husband  $a + b$ ; they told us in mathematics, it is equal to  $b + a$ . But here,  $a + b$  was not, and it was definitely not equal to  $b + a$ . It became a monstrously unbalanced equation, lopsided, unequal, impossible" (DHNT 42).

Manohar had once 'an aura of distinction' about him as a promising poet and as the secretary of the Literary Association. However, as the professional lives of

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Saru and Manu progress, their personal association gets embittered. It now became a power race of two egoistic individuals where Saru had superseded him. Manu could not love her as he used to do earlier. It was a typical case of a shattered male ego.

According to conventional social norms, for a woman, success in marriage means making adjustments, pleasing the male, sacrificing one's own identity, and silently steering her relationship with her husband. This patriarchal belief is so strongly rooted, especially in the male psyche, that it affects the behavior of even an educated man like Manu. Saru became a successful doctor, while Manu remained an underpaid lecturer. As a consequence, Saru faces a dichotomy in Manu's personality. He becomes a fearful stranger during the night and a pathetic man during the daytime. His sense of inferiority changes him into a sadist and a wreck who derives pleasure by harassing and hurting his wife. Manu's male ego is so subtly inflated by the patriarchal norms of his society that it bursts when he faces a situation where he has to accept his wife as his equal. Manu cannot simply accept his wife's superior economic position as a reputed doctor in society. The final hammer to the nail in the coffin is put when, in an interview, Saru is asked, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well" (DHNT 200)? Manu is also present at this time, but he merely laughs with Saru and the interviewer to hide his humiliation. But he takes it as an attack on his masculinity, and in order to assert his superiority as a male, he makes a beastly attack on Saru at night. He acts as a rapist even with his wife and lets his wounded pride manifest itself in sexual sadism. Saru talks about the hurting hands, the savage teeth, and the monstrous assault of a horribly familiar body (DHNT 102). The failure of a man like Manu, an educated person who married the woman he loved so dearly, to deal with a simple query shows how powerful the patriarchal pressures under which men lose all sanity. However, Saru returns to him in the end because, during her phase of self-introspection, she observes: "It is not what he's done to me, but what I've done to him." (DHNT 216). She says, "I destroyed his manhood" (DHNT 217). Deshpande does not justify or condone Manu's behavior. She presents the circumstances overpowered by patriarchal norms that dictate the man's actions, who is not aware of the option to behave in a rational and logical manner, too. Talking to Lakshmi Holmstrong about the 'home-coming' of her rebellious protagonists, Deshpande says :

And then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband or children, or about not being married, not having children, etc. I always try to make the point now about what feminism is not, and I say that we have to discover what is in our own lives and our experiences. (Pathak 248-249)

The novel *That Long Silence* is an intriguing story of Jaya, an Indian

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housewife who remains silent in order to maintain family peace with the belief that the onus of keeping relationships smooth lies solely on her. Mohan, Jaya's husband, represents the unspoken anguish of men that frequently comes with societal pressures upon them to act as per the patriarchal roles assigned to them. As Jaya endures repression in her private life, Mohan, too, finds himself caught in work-related challenges and the stress of adhering to societal standards of success. Through his character, Deshpande shows that patriarchy not only subjugates women but also enforces strict codes of conduct on men. Mohan cannot reach out to his wife except through her body because his entire behavior is directed by the patriarchal codes that he has imbibed very strongly. His unquestioning faith in these codes is reflected when he doesn't see any wrong being done to his own mother and sister. He believes that it is the norm and is, hence, correct. His sensibilities are dulled to such an extent that he does not even try to question the validity of the existing norms that suppress the women around him. Mohan's reactions to situations are in complete consonance with the societal expectations of him as a man, an agent of patriarchy. Deshpande indicates that the internalization of the patriarchal construction of womanhood makes it difficult for both men and women to outgrow the images and roles allotted to them. Jaya opts for a long silence in life because she too feels that she had hurt Mohan through her writings: "Looking at his stricken face, I had been convinced. I had done him wrong. And I stopped writing after that" (TLS 144).

There are numerous instances woven into the narrative that establish the complexities of the man-woman relationships strained under the obligations to conform to patriarchal expectations. During her first pregnancy, when Jaya suggests to Mohan that he should do cooking, he is highly amused as he thinks that cooking is not a man's job. He had imbibed this weird misconception from his socio-cultural environment, which draws strict boundaries between male and female domains. Unveiling the mental conflict of both Jaya and Mohan during their stay in the small Dadar flat, Deshpande puts the arc light on patriarchal attitudes. Mohan justifies his wrongdoing when he tells Jaya: "It was for you and the children that I did this. I wanted you to have a good life. I wanted the children to have all those things I never had" (TLS 9). He is not able to find a solution to his problems and expects Jaya to support him. However, his male pride thwarts this desire. A desperate Mohan feels deceived by her silence and bursts out: "Do you think I have not seen how changed you are since we came here, since I told you about my situation?" (TLS 122). At this juncture, Jaya is amused to see the impregnable masculinity of Mohan crumble to pieces. It is obvious that he desires her support but instead of 'asking' he 'demands'. This childish whining elicits Jaya's hysterical laugh. Her laughter signifies the truth that men are as imperfect and as human as women. Sadly, their celebrated male ego makes them so pompous that seeking help from their female counterpart is equated

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to 'defeat.' Assessing the marital equation, Deshpande establishes that both Jaya and Mohan have to perform their assigned roles. This is a typically conditioned response in a patriarchal system. Not only women but men are also the products of this culture and victims of the warped mindset of society.

*A Matter of Time* (published by Penguin Books, India, in 1996) deals with the evolution of the protagonist, Sumi, who struggles to unshackle herself from the repressions of conventions to move ahead as a new independent woman. Her husband, Gopal, unceremoniously deserts her without offering any reason. He is so engrossed in his personal problems that he fails to realize the suffering and pain he inflicts on his family. Sumi and Gopal enjoy a harmonious relationship during the early years of their marriage. Their joyous physical, as well as mental intimacy leads one to understand that they both valued their conjugal bliss. Gopal is reminded of the rapture of their first union, and he thinks, "And I knew then that it was for this, this losing yourself in another human being, that men give up their dreams of freedom" (AMOT 223). But after twenty-three years of marriage, their bubble of bliss bursts, and the inconsistency in their equation begins to gnaw upon their marriage. Gopal panics because he believes that he is unable to fulfill his obligation as a husband and as a father. Subsequently, he develops a feeling of loneliness and isolation. He starts deviating from his wife and chooses the coward's way by deserting everyone. Gopal's abandonment creates a vacuum in Sumi's life. Gopal begins to feel that he is failing utterly in fulfilling the idealistic expectations of him as a superior partner in marriage. He could not feel himself a Sa-Friday with Sumi. As the narrative moves, it becomes clear that even Gopal is clueless about his desertion, and his character is depicted as shades of an escapist.

Deshpande's canvas is replete with familiar hues depicting the position of women, but she also uses varied and wild tones from her pallet to explore an aspect regarding men who are intensely influenced by the patriarchal liberties that grant them the privilege of being unaccountable for everything they do. She shows how the stronghold of tradition makes scapegoats out of not just women but also men, turning them into victims. If patriarchy lays certain norms for women, there is a code of conduct meant for men, also. They are bound by this obligation to conform to the conventions of society and own the role of breadwinners for their families. Gopal's deviation from his family is due to his failure to comprehend the internal complexities that are fostered by the patriarchal social norms. Deshpande does not give any concrete reasons for Gopal's act, but there are isolated instances where we find an insight into his mind. People make various guesses and suppositions regarding his departure. Even Gopal seems to be groping in darkness. Sumi knows that 'the reason lies inside him, the reason is him' (AMOT 24). Gopal himself confesses that he was frightened of his inner Emptiness: "Emptiness, I realized then, is always waiting for

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us...We have to face the truth" (AMOT 52). He admits that he had stopped believing in the life he was leading, and it seemed unreal to him. However, the immediate factor behind Gopal's leaving the family may have been the article he wrote that evoked students' attacks on him and his subsequent resignation from his university job. But basically, there is an inner conflict in his mind. His bitter childhood experience perturbs him, and he walks out of the family to overcome his failure. He painfully remembers that his father had married his brother's widow, and he was born of that union. In his adolescence period, when he heard of this fact, his mind did not accept this relationship. He suffered from inner turmoil, and his predicament stood parallel to Hamlet's frustrated state of mind :

It was when I read Hamlet, fortunately much later, that the most terrible version of my parents' story entered my mind. Just that once, though, for I slammed the door on it immediately. In this story, my father became a man succumbing to his passion for his brother's wife, the woman compliant, a pregnancy and a child to come, and then, after the husband's convenient death (no, I couldn't, I just couldn't make my father poison his brother) a marriage of convenience. (AMOT 43)

Gopal is still searching for a solution to his loneliness and to achieve peace. He cannot convince anyone of the reason for his desertion. He realizes the futility of existence when Premi (Sumi's sister) reacts violently, and Gopal discloses his awareness of the meaninglessness of life and his loss of faith in it. He quotes Yudhishtira and explains to her the greatest wonder of life :

We see people die, and yet we go on as if we are going to live forever. That is the greatest marvel this world holds; it's a miracle. ...I stopped believing. The miracle failed for me, and there was nothing left. You've got to be the Buddha for that Emptiness to be filled with comparison for the world. For me, there was just Emptiness. (AMOT 133-134)

Sumi looks at desertion as 'sannyasa', but the word 'sannyasa' cannot be equated with the Vedic renunciation. Though the novel refers to passages from Upanishads, Gopal's decision to leave his family does not seem to imply the Vedic renunciation of the world. Gopal's abandoning of the family is not the result of saturation in worldly life. We agree with N. Poovalingam, who aptly sums up Gopal's situation when he says :

...the perception... that Gopal's desertion of his family signifies the Vedic renunciation... is not entirely convincing... Gopal's abandoning the family is not the result of saturation in the worldly life... His is more a withdrawal in pain than a renunciation due to contentment. Moreover, Gopal's life has nothing to offer in lines corresponding to the other Vedic stages of a man's life... His predicament is more akin to the existentialists (Pathak 174)

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Deshpande's oeuvre abounds in feminist issues, but she does not ignore the male characters in this process. One feels that, after all, Shashi Deshpande has succeeded in creating such male characters who stand by themselves and are not mere props to uphold the female protagonists. Siddhartha Sharma observes in his connection: "...Deshpande has ventured out of the cordon she had confined herself to and articulates the agony, pain, doubts, and fears of her protagonists—male and female alike." (63). When interviewed by Vanamala Vishwanath, Deshpande herself says that she wants to reach a stage where "I can write about human beings and not about women or men." (237)

Though Shashi Deshpande does not blame either Gopal or Sumi for the abrupt disintegration of their family, she gives a realistic and matter-of-fact depiction of the inner landscape of both her male and female characters. Gopal sometimes evokes the pity of readers for bringing distress to himself and his family. His description as a loving husband and gentle and caring father dissuades us from laying the blame squarely on his shoulders. Siddhartha Sharma quotes Subhash K. Jha: "Gopal is not our average cardboard cad but a distressed guilt-ridden husband and father baffled by his own sudden withdrawal from active domesticity" (60).

Deshpande delves deeply into the psychology of her women and analyses the condition of men. Although her works are women-centered, she does not altogether neglect the issue of masculinity and critically examines the relational parameters within which her feminism works. Focusing on masculinity and exploring the possibility of bringing a change in male response, she sees men, too, as a victim of pre-conceived images enforced by patriarchy. The difference, however, is that while the woman tries to free herself of that image, a man holds on to it. As Deshpande's perceptive gaze penetrates through aggressive male facades, she sheds light on the insecurities arising from a threat to the only identity that men have known. Mohan, in *That Long Silence*, constructs his wife in the stock feminine role to cater to his own need to be the man; Manohar's cruelty in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* stems from his own inability to be the provider. Deshpande implies that just as women need to break out of the prescribed roles similarly men too need to be helped out to move from restricting roles to supportive roles that are more suited to the demands of the changing times.

Shashi Deshpande has delineated some situations where men help women realize their true selves and materialize their dreams. Kamat helps Jaya in establishing her identity. He is warm, friendly, and companionable. He treats Jaya as an equal. She admits that with Kamat, 'I had been a woman- I had been just myself' (TLS 153). In the company of Kamat, she sheds the crippling silence she had imposed on herself, erasing every sign of her identity. Through such parallel relations, Deshpande wants to show the best possible relationship that could exist between Jaya and Mohan.



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Similarly, Boozie and Padmakar help Saru. Through these relationships, the writer wants to show that women seek partners outside marriage because their respective husbands are too serious about the patriarchal roles assumed by them. The men outside the bondage of matrimony are free from this burden, and they easily give up their superfluous masculinity to emerge as balanced and dependable individuals who mean more to the women in their lives than their spouses.

Through portraying such a change, Deshpande shows the possibility of eventually drawing men into supportive roles without threatening their identities and by providing them positive returns in lieu of the control they give up. She supports an ideal family setup where men and women stand on equal footing, moving ahead in an atmosphere of cooperation and reconciliation. Deshpande observes, "And how can feminism be anti-men when it is really working a better, more meaningful and companionable relationship between men and women, instead of the uneasy relationship between tyrant and oppressed?" (WFTM 84). This constructive concept of feminism aims to help women fulfill themselves, materialize their dreams, and establish their identities. In such circumstances, there won't be any frustrations because there will be no power play. Deshpande favours to uphold the dignity of men-women equations and emphasizes more on empowerment through self-introspection and education.

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