

## Masculinities in *Moving On* and *The Dark Holds No Terror* by Shashi Deshpande

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### Abstract:

Though Shashi Deshpande's novels are usually looked at from feminist perspective, she doesn't herself like to be labeled as a feminist writer. There is much more than a feminist point of view expressed by her through her characters in her fiction. She mostly focuses on the issues relating to the rights, desires, and struggles of women and consequently speaking for all the women but at the same time she doesn't forget to speak for the men, their point of view and their issues as well. The story telling technique by Shashi Deshpande is also indicative of her view that things should not be looked at from a single perspective.

This paper will examine the need for understanding the constant effort made by Shashi Deshpande to put across a male's perspective and advocates the need to differentiate between being feminist and anti-men. Deshpande systematically brings out the different facets of men's lives and the way they are labelled on the things they do without even knowing their plight. This paper will also unravel the key ideas of masculinities that Deshpande offers as an aid to understand men's lives better and also the fact that like women, men have their own issues to resolve and cope up with which is usually overlooked.

**Key words:** Masculinity, femininity, individuality, gender roles, patriarchy, perspectives, point of view.

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Masculinity, in Indian society, has always been identified with a male-dominant social set up in which men are characterized by qualities traditionally attributed to them, that is, aggressive, strong both physically and mentally, breadwinner, practical, tough, and inflexible. Indian women, thus, have an oppressed, colonized and subjugated status in the society owing to the fact that male get the upper hand because of the attributes of masculinity attached to them.

Though Shashi Deshpande's novels are usually looked at from feminist perspective, she doesn't herself like to be labeled as a feminist writer. Since in Deshpande's works the focus is always on women and the story also centers on women in different societal setup facing different issues at various levels, the fiction of Shashi Deshpande is always looked at from a feminist perspective and some authors even firmly believe it to be the only way to look at them. In her book *Beyond the Walls: Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurence* Vijay Sheshadri finds Shashi Deshpande to be depicting her women characters to have been leading their lives as marginalized persons in male-dominated societies. Pramod Kumar Singh and R.K. Gupta also regard Shashi Deshpande as a novelist studying the sufferings of women and discuss it in their critical essay: "The Concept of New Woman in Shashi Deshpande's Novel *That Long Silence*" and assert: "Shashi Deshpande, a prominent and up-coming Indo-Anglian writer, has delineated the undulation of the female ego or self under the pressure of critical human predicaments and emotional affinities. Her attention is focused on feminine sufferings in Indian society. The feminist literary tradition is grown out of the anxieties of woman's life" (Singh and Gupta: 89).

However, there is much more than a feminist point of view expressed by Deshpande through her characters in her fiction. Shashi Deshpande sees the need to harmonize the man-woman relationship as equal partners. There is no victory in the subjugation and destruction of the male. The need is to see each other's need for space, freedom of expression and love (Kaur, 2009: 24) Deshpande has been believed to have focused on the issues relating to the rights, desires, and struggles of women and consequently speaking for all the women but when one goes through her text it is noteworthy that she doesn't forget to speak for the men, their point of view and their issues either. The story telling technique by Shashi Deshpande voices her view about the same. She narrates her story in such a way that we get to see a different picture of the things portrayed from many angles. On one hand while she makes her protagonist, a woman, voice her opinion on their conditions in the societal setup but on the other hand she gives equal opportunity to the men in the story to put across their story, opinion and issues related to them. As pointed out in the words of Shashi Kanta Sharma: "Usually Shashi Deshpande makes her protagonist tell her story but in some cases the protagonist tells only a part of her story and the rest of it is told by an omniscient narrator or some other character in the novel" (*Polarities* 2013: 161).

The novel *Moving On* spans over four generations and presents a constantly changing patterns of relationships. The protagonist of the novel, Manjari, is a woman and presents the incidents from her point of view, that is, a feminist perspective but as soon as we start seeing the novel through Manjari's perspective getting to know things her way, Deshpande beautifully introduces a diary. A diary written by Manjari's father which explores the masculine perspective giving us an insight into the psyche of the male characters and helping us understand their behavior in a particular way being very different from the way the protagonist had perceived it to be. Vasu, Badrinath's wife, widely known for her shyness and reticence, was an ardent advocate of freedom, always wanted to be on her own, freedom from the constant demands and claims on her. Her suppressed anger is poured out in the form of the stories that she writes. Writing becomes an important means for her to fight and speak against patriarchal set up.

Manjari, Vasu's daughter, also opposes the things which she doesn't like and expresses her desire for freedom. Just like a post-modern, progressive woman Manjari makes the desires of

her body open before all. She transgresses the defined domains of her parents and marries Shyam. Though Badrinath had been initially represented by Manjari as not understanding and appreciating this freedom, towards the end of his life Badrinath himself justifies disobedience and rebellion as an indication of growth. In his own words, “To me, disobedience is not the original sin; in fact I don’t see it as a sin at all. It is a part of growing up, of moving on. Without the serpent we would have remained forever our child-selves, living in a state of innocence, nothing happening, our story stalled. We need the serpent to keep the story moving” (205).

Shashi Deshpande through her narration and narrative technique in *Moving On*, where she has given distinct voices to men and women alike despite the fact that the protagonist of the novel is a woman, clearly puts across her idea of a picture which is complete only when it is looked and analysed from different perspective. Deshpande brings out the fact that things can never be understood unless they are looked at from all the possible perspectives. There are situations where one person can be right and the other might be wrong but there are also possibilities of both being right in their own ways in a conflict between two. The relevance of perception in the text is clearly pointed out by Shashi Deshpande in the words of Baba from the novel where he says, “We’ve been talking about the Mahabharata... We’ve agreed that the whole of human existence lies within it *because* it is not a story written by one person; this is why it has something for everyone. One person’s picture will always remain incomplete, always lacking. So will this account of mine be flawed? And yet, it helps. In searching for words, I find the clouds slowly dissolving. Things becomes visible, they become clearer, I see things have not seen before” (320)

Deshpande has employed the technique of perception to reflect the same about the age old conflict between men and women, and takes a neutral stand on the same. She accepts the suppression and the marginalization of women by the patriarchal society but at the same time she doesn’t blame men only for the same. She uses the concept of perception to portray that the problem lies with the social system and our respective roles assigned in it and men and women are equally suffering in their own ways. But while the issues of women are clearly evident and

usually addressed, the issues of men are hardly bothered about because of the superior stature attributed to them by the society.

*The Dark Holds No Terror* is totally different novel in the sense that it explodes the myth of man's unquestionable superiority and the myth of woman being a martyr and a paragon of all virtues. Saru, the protagonist in the novel, is a symbol of a progressive woman who tries to exercise her influence over whatever she does, wherever she goes. She always prefers to take the road less travelled. She doesn't like women friends who mould themselves into the traditional stereotypes and remain the silent, nameless waiter at the dining table. At home she always tries to control Dhruva, her brother. Manohar, her husband, was the master of the family before she got recognition as a doctor. Earlier she was known as the wife of Manohar but now after the explosion in the factory people recognized Manohar as the doctor's husband. It is this aggressiveness, desire for freedom in Saru and her being the breadwinner in the family which disturbs the archetype of the anima that Manohar had before marrying Saru. This shatters their family life as Manohar thinks Saru's success as his failure. The remark made by Atrey and Kirpal is really relevant in this context: "Unable to assert his 'manliness' over her(Saru) like a traditional male(that is, in economic terms), he resorts to sexual molestation of her nightly while playing the loving husband during the day. His purpose, though repressed in the subconscious, is to 'punish' her for taking on the 'male' role, and to assert his superiority and power through physical violence" (43).

Manus's indifference to Saru, the inflexibility of male attitude and the resentment to change in the patriarchal society is not because of his hostility towards female self-hood. It is mainly because the way patriarchy has been shaped which bears a negative influence on the minds, imaginations, psyches and behavior of men. Men resist changing because of the fear of losing their very constituent of identity defined by patriarchy which gives them a superior status in the society. Men are born with the attributes of masculinities attached to them by the society and men in some way or the other struggle throughout their life to establish and maintain the masculinities that earn them a privileged status in the societal setup. The struggles to prove

themselves in front of the society make men they way they are and the way they behave. The male behaviour and attitude thus is more of a survival instinct for men to be men than being anti-women.

Talking about the representation of men in the works of Shashi Deshpande, Manpreet J Singh in her book titled *Male Image, Women Gaze: Men in Shashi Deshpande's Fiction* says that the world which Shashi Deshpande presents in her novels is not a world consisting of men or women alone but a world that functions only through the connection and co operation with each other. In her words about Shashi Deshpande's Fictions: "In this sense, her works are as much an effort to re-define masculinity as they are an endeavour to re-structure femininity" (*Male:10*). Manpreet J Singh further says that the women do have an oppressed position in the Indian society but men are not to be blamed for this. She says that men have their own fear and insecurities which make them behave in a particular way. In her opinion, it is the patriarchal system we have in our society which is the root cause of all the issues related to female autonomy and freedom. Singh further explains her point about Shashi Deshpande's treatment of feminism in her fiction saying: "Deshpande does not utilize feminism to perpetuate allegories of gender oppression or to endorse an iconoclastic stance, she uses it as an analytical tool, which works through individual contexts in relation to which women stand empowered or disempowered" (*Men:15*).

This view is substantiated by Shashi Deshpande in her *Writing From the Margin and Other Essays* where Deshpande defends her work as being feminist but not anti-men : "How can feminism be anti-men, when it is really working for a better relationship between men and women instead of an uneasy relationship between tyrants and oppressed" (*Writing: 83-84* ). Singh further says that the rigidity and inflexibility of male attitude towards women or change in their condition is because of threat they feel towards the superior status they enjoyed in the patriarchal society. Singh's work is about finding out a compromise or resolution between male and female towards achieving a balance in social and familial construction. Singh also

emphasizes the need for the women to make the relationship workable from her point of view but at the same time involving men in the process.

The other relevant work dealing with the same theme is *Polarities in the Fiction of Shashi Deshpande* by Shashi Kant Sharma. In this work Sharma tries to demonstrate that there is nothing like women are always right, oppressed, suffering and men the otherwise. She uses a variety of polarities spring up between individuals, groups and communities in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. The polarities demonstrated by Sharma in the novels by Deshpande are the polarity between husband and wife, a parent and a child, between a brother and his sister, between cousins, between families, between castes and between communities. Sharma has tried to study these polarities and their various dimensions. According to her, the polarities are classified on the basis of various factors such as psychological, economical and sociological. The psychological factors which include egoistic thinking, inferiority and superiority complexes, variance in perceptions, want of moral restraints and prejudicial outlook account for the majority of polarities in the novels of Deshpande. Talking about the polarities in the fiction of Shashi Deshpande says: “The incidents which occur in Shashi Deshpande’s novels are quarrels between a husband and his wife, a mother and her daughter, a girl and her cousin, the guardian and the ward, and the like, elopements, adulteries, rapes, murders of adversaries, group-fights, attempts to snatch property, financial irregularities and attempts to escape punishment, suicides and the like, and their consequences” (*Polarities* 2013: 158).

Through her study of polarities Sharma tries to point out that there is much more to the fiction of Deshpande than just the feminist perspective usually attached to it. The polarities found in different relationships are evident of the fact that the issue is not only confined to the aspects of male and female as in the relationship between husband and his wife. The conflict between a mother and her daughter, guardian and the ward and between sisters adds a different dimension to it. Joel Kvortti holds that feminism is not the only concern in her novels and that they are multi-layered, as he writes that Shashi Deshpande’s: “Writing began from the realization of ‘what it was to be a woman in this country’, but she does not want to be labeled a feminist. In

many of her novels although they are to Deshpande's dismay almost invariably in academic analyses viewed from a feminist perspective, the themes are multilayered" (Mittapalli: 210).

The works by Shashi Kant Sharma and Manpreet J Singh are relevant for giving an insight into the male characters in the novels of Deshpande, especially, from a female's point of view. Rajeshwar Mittapalli's work, on the other hand, helps in understanding that how the fiction of Shashi Deshpande is more about human relationship than feminism. The male characters that Deshpande creates, especially those that occur in the selected novels, are multi-faceted men who do not go through life simply or straightforwardly. They are always involved in some or the other issue and fights, their greatest fight are ultimately fought within themselves.

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