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## Men for gender equilibrium: A critical study of Shashi Deshpande's fiction

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### Abstract

In a traditional society the image of men is generally formulated by the role models they have before them. Their grandfathers, fathers, uncles, elder brothers and other male members around them offer examples of a so called ideal man. This reveals that men are merely products of patriarchal system than independently developed human beings. In an effort to be men as per the patriarchal image they suffer a loss in their behavior and outlook. They feel themselves bounded to act in the way their elders have acted. Hence, they suppress various human impulses and inclinations which are, in fact, indispensable for a healthy human being. Men's stifling of natural impulses leads to lopsidedness in their personalities. In many patriarchal societies, including India's, we tend to equate the masculine and the feminine with men and women. However, this forceful equation harms not only the men but also women, their families and societies at large. In a bid to prove themselves masculine boys and men develop a tendency to suppress the traits described as feminine and in the same way to prove themselves feminine girls and women strive to repress the so called masculine side of their personality. This denies opportunity to both men and women of growing into human beings having the qualities of both the sexes. The mad pursuit of men to prove themselves 'masculine,' force them to be tough, authoritative, aggressive, and domineering. They almost forget the fact that they are first humans and then men and women. However, there are some men who realize that dividing human traits into masculine and feminine is injurious to both the sexes. They exhibit the courage to cross the confines of their sex for bringing harmony and balance between men and women.

**Keywords:** Equilibrium, masculine, feminine, patriarchal society, balanced

### Introduction

Masculine and feminine energies are traditionally viewed as two separate and opposite entities which can never be merged in one human being. The fact that this separation is destructive for both the sexes is not easily accepted by men and women who are born and bred in a patriarchal family. They generally tend to believe in and follow the age old beliefs and practices of their sexes without minding the loss they suffer on this account. Men, in particular, assume that they are benefited in this system, so they wish to continue it. But the reality is different. Seeing the harmfulness of the separation of men and women in different categories many great men in the past have suggested a creative merger of both the energies for concord and equilibrium of the two in one person. They were cognizant of the fact that the existence of only manly or womanly qualities creates an imperfect and imbalanced personality. For this reason, we have the concept of half male and half female in Hinduism. Similarly, in the west, there is concept of male and female fused into one. The image of Lord Shiva appears very pertinent here as his one picture is believed to be made of the body of half-man and half-woman. This makes Shiva a person incorporating the brilliance of both man and woman. Therefore, in humans also, a person having the qualities of both the sexes comes out as a balanced and absolute human being. Such men can easily establish tuneful correlation with others.

In real life one meets persons who appear to recognize that both men and women are victim of the forms of social training. They accept the role of social and cultural forces in constructing the frame of mind of individuals. They believe that in a civilized society people cannot live harmoniously without rejecting practices and values that would subjugate other human beings. In fact, patriarchal norms put men in straightjackets from where they find no easy release.

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The observation of Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett is very appropriate here:

In pursuit of this aim (sexual balance), feminism puts men and masculinities in a critical spotlight.... Certainly in terms of sustaining unequal material advantage, opportunity, status and privilege, men have much to lose with the rise of feminist thinking. Conversely, we would also argue that men have much to gain, not least in achieving emotional well-being, empathy with others, quality of relationships, reflexivity, and balance in their lives.

They further say:

For the sake of this and future generations it can only be good that men recognize they have gender, rather than perceive gender to be about women and, thus, peripheral to how they experience the world.... However, as feminists have long argued, the historical centrality of male-stream writing, philosophy and political practice has served to make men invisible, particularly to themselves... it is a condition that continues for many males.

Many movements for the equality of sexes combined with increasing focus on men and their attitude has changed the thinking of many men. Now men are gradually becoming aware of the fact that they are getting separated from life itself. They understand that only being masculine as per the standards of the patriarchal beliefs is not enough; they must possess the qualities that are generally associated with women. In fact, some men appear desperate to find an escape from traditional masculine codes. Now they acknowledge, as James D. Reimer puts it, that "It is not sufficient to know the limitations and negative effects of our present ideal manhood. There also must be a recognition and reinforcement of positive alternatives to traditional masculine ideals and behaviours."

No doubt, some of the men are really serious about the harms of asymmetry in their personalities. They have started looking for optimistic alternatives as they no longer call gender traits 'feminine' or 'masculine'. They consider these traits human traits and hold that positive masculine and feminine values are need of both men and women. Many have started working to materialize this positive thought for a change. This change is already visible in relationships, domestic life and sexual behavior of many men. They admit that both men and women should be assertive and sensitive, rational and emotional, home makers and entrepreneurs, domestic and public figures. Women's movement towards public space has encouraged some men to enter into domestic spheres. They seem to be willing to share the responsibilities, home-management, child care and nursing. They are expressive, friendly and compassionate in their dealings with women and children. They care for women and other weaker persons and treat them as their equals. Along with this, they also express candidly their own fears, cowardice, and anxieties. This suggests that men can be caring, gentle, and accommodating in their life if they are allowed to develop these traits independently. Anna Ford, in her book *Men: A Documentary*, answers to the question why men have started this change:

Some men are beginning to voice their rejection of the male stereotype, for they are outgrowing the uncomfortable straightjacket of traditional masculinity, the pressure of hierarchical progression at work, the masculine preference for logical thought, rather than feelings, the harsh competitive nature of their world, and the constant need to prove themselves to do rather than to be.

Today many men feel that patriarchal structures are imposition of undue restrictions and burdens on them. They support the movements against the evils of patriarchy. Not only today, in past too, the sex-specific roles have been inverted at times. History offers many examples of such cases. Ashoka the Great, a warrior, moved away from the battlefield of Kalinga and chose a non-violent and peaceful life showing the side of his healthy human self, generally designated as the feminine in the society of that time. Mahatma Gandhi too displayed great sympathy and care, and accepted that he felt like a mother and woman on several occasions. Similarly, the motherly image was also visible in the character of Vinoba Bhave.

In her novels *The Dark Hold No Terrors* and *That Long Silence* Shashi Deshpande has portrayed some male characters who behave like normal human beings as they exhibit certain so-called feminine qualities in their personalities. This testifies to the fact that men and women are not naturally what they have been defined by societal standards. They willingly do things which are considered not representative of their sex. They are often seen as being shy and insecure, worried and self-deprecatory. They do not mind taking care of children and doing domestic work. They do not react aggressively to the traumatic situations as generally men are thought to do. They do not govern others, especially women around them, but readily accept women as their equivalent. They feel that in the altering state of affairs, their frame of mind should also be changed into a tolerant and inclusive one giving liberty to women to live their own life in a stress-free way. Such men are not stick to the socially defined terms and conditions of masculinity; they seem to be very comfortable in moving in and out of male and female images suggesting that gender norms can be violated easily. This is because many men simply cannot afford to be masculine in the way society expects. They know these norms are formed and articulated unnaturally. They find it difficult to live up to the standard of ideal manhood. Therefore, they are often seen as questioning typical masculine and feminine roles and, readily embrace their new responsibilities and duties in the changing world.

In the literary world of Shashi Deshpande one may easily find some of the male characters who display the womanly side of their self with ease. It seems that they are totally untouched by the codes of patriarchal system and the myth of man. Their failure in fulfilling the social expectations generally does not result in frustrations and tensions in them. It does not lead to a negative change in their behavior either. They do not consider their wives and other family members responsible for their failures. Such men are not afraid of taking the responsibilities of the consequences of their deeds.

Deshpande's men not only defy masculine codes but also show valor to eliminate them so that a healthy relationship may be established between the sexes. They accept that women are also human beings and require equal importance and autonomy. In giving freedom to women men also get freedom from the burden patriarchy puts on them and which is really beneficial for men. Not only women but men also should be given chances to express their feelings and emotions freely. Kamat in *That Long Silence*, is the perfect example of a man who effaces his masculinity and shows some of the qualities attributed to women. Jaya is the protagonist of the novel whose husband Mohan is not sensitive to her needs. She feels that she cannot reveal her

feelings to him. This reminds Jaya of Kamat, a gentle and sympathetic man, who used to live upstairs, when Jaya and Mohan stayed in their Dadar flat. Kamat, unlike Mohan, is not good-looking or well groomed; he is middle-aged and bulky with graying hair. He is not socially distinguished. He is only an advertiser who is just a shadowy figure in the novel. Unlike other men, he has no problem in doing “unmanly” things like working in kitchen. In fact, he is proud of his culinary skills. He is compassionate and objective. Moreover, he conducts himself with ease and elegance in the company of women. He treats Jaya as his equal. R.K. Sharma reveals her mind when he says, “While every man Jaya meets puts on a different face and a false smile, making his condescension all too palpable, with Kamat, she comes into herself. He is, as it were, her alter-ego. Jaya feels a compulsive urge to reveal her thoughts before him and a need for his companionship.” He is free from manly egotism, sense of superiority and authority. He has no desire to possess and control women and to assert himself. While the other men, including her husband Mohan, undervalue her wishes, he treats her as an equal, and gives importance to her thoughts and dreams. Jaya acknowledges: “With this man I had not been a woman. I had been just myself Jaya. There had been an ease in our relationship I had never known in any other”(153).

Generally, men try to suppress women, but Kamat, like an iconoclast, urges Jaya to break free of her complexes. Under his tutelage, Jaya realizes that she has to exorcise the fears that have made her “the stereotype of a woman ... needing male help and support” (95). His treatment of Jaya as an equal encourages her to shed her inhibitions. Jaya’s association with Kamat develops into a deep friendship based on communication. That is why, in him Jaya finds the companion she missed in Mohan. She shares with Kamat the memories of her father and her desires to become a writer. Her husband Mohan asks her to stop writing stories but Kamat encourages her and helps her discover her talent as a writer. He tells Jaya what was wrong with her story: “It’s too restrained. Spew your anger in your writing, woman, spew it out. Why are you holding it in?” (47). In his company, Jaya feels herself complete and whole as she admits: “It had been a revelation to me that two people, a man and a woman, could talk this way. With this man, I had not been a woman. I had just been myself – Jaya” (158).

Kamat develops an “asexual” relationship with Jaya. He gives her encouragement and comfort and the best of attention that she desired from her husband Mohan. He can scold her like an elder brother and he can praise her like a lover, as, “Your name is like your face” (132). Consequently, Jaya reveals him things she would never dare talk about to Mohan. He brings Jaya into an open space out of her darkness and for a while behaves as a woman does. Shashi Deshpande comments on the significance of the character of Kamat in an interview: “... I did bring in Kamat to serve a purpose: to show Jaya the kind of relationship that she could achieve with a man. She gets a kind of companionship with Kamat that she never gets from her husband. Yet that is marriage and this isn’t.” He is proud of his qualities and easily transcends stifling male consciousness and lives by the ethics of human equality and partnership.

Thus, Kamat is presented as a foil to Mohan who shows mannish egotism. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Saru’s father also stands opposite to the character of Manohar, her

husband, who demonstrates his masculinity through sexual aggression. Her father appears to be a calm and thoughtful man who does not believe that masculinity needs to be established necessarily through violent behavior. He is gentle and soothing which makes him equivalent to an astute, a worldly wise man, who deviates from the accepted behavioural patterns. When Saru, on hearing the news of her mother’s death, returns home after a gap of fifteen years, she finds that he has become comfortable in the role of the housekeeper. He meets the exigencies of life with remarkable ease. He cooks, and looks after Madhav like a mother. Saru wonders: “He had always been so much a man, ‘the master of the house,’ not to be bothered by any of the travails of daily routine. And yet he seemed comfortable in this new role, as if his earlier inactivity had been a giving-in to his wife’s ideas, nothing to do with himself”(20). Saru always considered him a feeble man, but in fact he is tolerant and humane. As she looks back into the past, she realizes that he had always supported her modestly, wordlessly and unconditionally. He had supported her desire for further studies and sent her to the medical college, her mother had strong objection. Towards the end of the novel, he becomes a close friend for Saru, something which his wife could never become. He tries to take the place of Saru’s mother by asking her to tell him everything of her nightmarish experiences caused by her husband, Manu. Ultimately, he emerges as an emotional and compassionate friend to his daughter.

Deshpande also seems to reject the myth of man as dominant and aggressive by nature through the character of Saru’s classmate, Padmakar Rao. He seems to be fed-up with playing the unnatural role of a man which demands dominance and authority over others. He tries to live a stress-free life by rejecting some of the masculine traits and roles, and by adopting some of those perceived as the feminine ones. In the novel, he meets Saru years later as a medical practitioner in a slum area. In college, he was commonly known as Padma because of his feminine features. In his company, Saru felt comfortable since his feminine name gave her a sense of belongingness. He was also the most vocal critic of male hegemony. Now again, he complains that his wife does not relate to him on equal terms but waits on him. She is a traditionalist and also tries to make him feel like a traditional husband. He tells Saru that he hates his wife because “She cannot talk about anything but servants and children. And prices. I earn enough, but she’s perpetually trying to economize. She never has her food until I go to have mine, she cooks just what I like and she never calls me by my name” (132). Padma does not want to govern his wife but she, on the other hand, believes in submission to her husband. Thus, he is a man who does not want to exercise his masculine power and position. Like Kamat, he is in favour of giving equality to women.

The study of these men reveals that men can also form friendship and a relation based on equality with women undistorted by the idea of sexual conquest. They can be sympathetic to the needs of women giving the freedom to assert their own rights and they value the positive qualities in women instead of feeling threatened by them. In this context, Acharya Dada Dharmadhikari rightly points out: Man’s fellowship enriches the woman with his virtues only after the woman has reached the consummation of femininity. Similarly, man’s personality, having fully

developed in itself the excellences peculiar to man, enriches itself in its merging with the virtues of the woman. This integrated personhood is neither half-woman nor half-man, it is the complete, fully integrated woman-man.

Although the number of such characters in Deshpande's world is small, they are exemplary for others. Her idea that by defying mythical and social norms, man and woman together can bring equilibrium is fully revealed through them. That is why, along with offering a critical understanding of their rights, privileges, roles and responsibilities, they also appear to provide a critique of male domination, power, authority, sexuality, knowledge system and male ordering of social relations. Transcending the myth of masculinity, they reveal that nature has given both masculine and feminine traits to a man as well as to a woman. Dwelling on the same point, Maria Mies observes:

The process for the liberation of women and men are interrelated. It is not possible for women in our societies to break out of the cages of patriarchal relations, unless the men begin movement in the same direction. A man's movement against patriarchy should not be motivated by benevolent paternalism, but by the desire to restore to themselves a sense of human dignity and respect.

The whole discussion suggests that Shashi Deshpande is very much critical of the stereotypes of man and woman that exist in the society. Her novels reveal how man and woman can transcend the gender boundaries trying to live in accordance with their fundamental human self. Being a mirror-holder to society, she shows that gradually the "myth" of separateness of the sexes is getting replaced by the "reality" that both men and women are primarily human beings and that their division into binary and hierarchical oppositions is artificial.

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