

The Façade of Hegemonic Masculinities in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

Anshu Kiran and Smarika Pareek

Abstract

Written by Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is a cornerstone Indian feminist text. It aptly depicts patriarchal edifices, power privilege, and daunting social dimensions of Indian society. It portrays the trauma of Indian middle-class, working individuals who have been ensnared in complex matrices of society and politics. Though it has been criticised harshly, critical analysis of the social structure known as hegemonic masculinity has impacted and examined a variety of sectors in terms of its relevance for the analysis of gender studies and gender relations. This article seeks to discuss vestigial patriarchal structures in India and the relationship between men and women in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. This will be approached through R. W. Connell's gender order theory to further explain the classical patriarchal paradigms and veracity of Indian Society.

Keywords: Hegemony, Masculinity, Patriarchy, Men, Gender.

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande's works use postmodern techniques in an eclectic way, including the deconstruction of patriarchal culture and rituals. Much of her work openly explores the obstacles women encounter and their pursuit of personal fulfillment. Deshpande has proven herself to be both a true successor to the authors she admires, as well as a contemporary in her own right, thanks to her creative prowess and track record of accomplishment. Her protagonists are brilliant, urban young women who are disappointed by the confines of a conservative, male-dominated society. Mirnalini Sebastian speaks on these portrayals:

Woman occupies a central place in Shashi Deshpande's novels. The novelist presents a subtle analysis of conflicting phases and underlying reasons, and some extent, to suggest a way out of it. It becomes more interesting to analyse the image of woman in the novels

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when it is portrayed by a woman.¹

Using examples from Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and the application of Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity in the novel, the article draws on empirical research to argue that Connell's core principle in a formal framework of sexualities significantly affects our notions of gender, gender roles, subjugation, dominance, and patriarchy.

An Outline of Feminist Theory

"Relation" would be a solid contender to sum up gender theory innovation since the 1970s in one word. A key hurdle to a feminist sociological revolution has been removed by the theoretical movement from "gender roles" to "gender interactions." Raewyn Connell has played an important role in this paradigm shift. Her notion of masculinities became the "one theoretical framework" for researching men and masculinity. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, formulated two decades ago, has considerably influenced recent thinking about men, gender, and social hierarchy.²

The notion is widely used in masculinity studies and has influenced feminist, sexuality, and international research. Due to its widespread application in studies of masculinities, the subject of this article is Connell's notion regarding hegemonic masculinity "because of its usefulness for examining patterns of power and the process of gender hierarchies."³

Although it has been heavily critiqued, the perception of hegemonic masculinity has always had a substantial influence on gender studies in numerous fields. Throughout the 1980s, the notion was developed and applied as studies on masculinities and men expanded. Feminist theorists counter the primary criticisms by maintaining that the concept of masculinity itself is not essentialist or reified, as is often claimed. Conversely, there is

Anshu Kiran is currently a full time research scholar in Chandigarh University. She completed her Master's from Jammu University. Her research focuses on Gender Studies. Smarika Pareek has completed her MA, MPhil and PhD in English literature at University of Rajasthan, Jaipur. She has more than ten years of teaching experience and is presently working as an Associate Professor at Chandigarh University. Her areas of interest are postcolonial literature and comparative studies.

¹ Minalini Sebastian, *The Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Post-Colonial Argument* (Michigan: Prestige Books, 2000), p. 15.

² R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 6 (2005), p. 829.

³ Clare Bartholomaeus, 'I'm Not Allowed Wrestling Stuff: Hegemonic Masculinity and Primary School Boys', *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2012), p. 228.

merit to the criticism levelled at frameworks that solely focus on gender characteristics and rigid typologies. Research into hegemonic masculinity can improve its approach to the topic by drawing on up-to-date psychological models, but there are limitations to conceptual versatility that must be acknowledged. If we are to comprehend hegemonic masculinity as a paradigm of social reproduction, we must first comprehend social battles in which subjugated masculinities impact dominant forms.

This theory can be defined as an ideology or set of practices that uphold the superiority of men in society and excuses discrimination, especially towards women and queer individuals. It is a theory that attempts to clarify the pervasiveness of patriarchal structures in societies where women, as well as other gender identities, are historically marginalised.

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. Men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a complicit masculinity. It was in relation to this group, and to compliance among heterosexual women, that the concept of hegemony was most powerful. Hegemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion.⁴

These ideas cited by Connell and Messerschmidt are abstract rather than descriptive, and they are articulated in terms of traditional patriarchal logic. They postulate that gender roles might change over time and that gender dynamics were cyclical. Accordingly, hegemonic masculinities formed under particular conditions are open to historical transformation. To be more explicit, it is possible that several conceptions of masculinity will compete to become the standard. It was possible that as part of the path to abolition, a more empathetic, less repressive conception of manhood might come to the forefront.

Hegemonic masculinity has various definitions, but the most cited is from critical masculinities theorists like Connell and Messerschmidt, who accept the basic feminist idea that society is organised around unequal gender

⁴ Connell and Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity', p. 832.

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relations. They also acknowledged the limitations of the idea of patriarchy as an explanation for this. In place of patriarchy, Connell developed the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which acknowledges that under the condition of gender and equality men are also stratified against each other and only minorities of men enjoy patriarchal privileges as well as power. This is due to the interplay between gender and other critical factors like socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Hegemonic masculinity, as described by Karl, is the arrangement of gendered activity that assures or is assumed to guarantee men's superior status and women's subjugation in society. Messerschmidt unpacks this, adding,

Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally idealized form of masculinity in a given historical and social setting. It is culturally honored, and glorified—such as that the broader societal level (e.g., through the mass media) and at the institutional level (e.g., in school) and is constructed in relation to “subordinated masculinities” (e.g., homosexuality) and in relation to women.⁵

Connell's key example regarding hegemonic masculinity can be described as a relational concept pertaining to male social interactions and their hierarchical sizing. So, while there are multiple forms of masculinity, these are not equal. One expression of masculinity—usually that of the ruling class—is the most culturally idolised or hegemonic form. This sets the standard towards which all other men strive, but can rarely achieve.

Application

After discussing in detail hegemonic masculinity, with the help of some elucidations from the text *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the respective theory will be implemented to portray the unexplored dimension of the novel. The novel is about Sarita,⁶ a highly educated, self-sufficient Indian woman on the hunt for her own identity. Sarita's connection with her parents and spouse, as well as her search for herself, are the focal point of story. Describing her characters, Deshpande states,

My characters take their ways. I have heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with women as they are. Most of the women I've known are like that – their decisions are made for them. Due to being overprotected, they are

⁵ Connell and Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity Rethinking the Concept', p. 198.

⁶ Sarita is also referred to as 'Saru' throughout the novel, an affectionate nickname.

people think one way and do another.⁷

She rewrites the position of women in her story, as well as their struggle for self-identity and the desire for life. She depicts the destiny of each woman, how their actions affect their lives, and how conventions factor into their decisions. Additionally, she demonstrates how these effects flow over to impact male characters as well. As a result, this is a fresh attempt to bring attention to the issues that males experience in their households. Every decision made by a woman regarding their domestic environment has an impact on the men, both good and bad. J. Revathy explains,

In this novel. Each and every decision is taken by Sarita and her mother, the men in the family and the men around them suffer. This paper especially limelight's the problems faced by men characters like Manu, Sarita's father, Madhav, and Padmakar by the unbending decision taken by the women characters Sarita and Sarita's mother in this novel.⁸

Generally, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* depicts the harsh reality that even the most educated and accomplished modern ladies, like Sarita, experience.. She is modest, contemporary, and sympathetic, yet lacking in self-confidence. She aspires to be a free individual with her own identity and a sense of purpose in life. Her decisions and how they form her future are influenced by her father, mother, and husband (Manu), as well as her acquaintances Nalu and Smitha. Most important to our discussion of the novel, however, is how hegemonic masculinity impacts the family, especially its male members.

The Dark Holds No Terrors narrates the story of a marriage on the rocks. The protagonist Saritha is a successful lady doctor. It tells her conflict that she has to face as a doctor and as a wife. During daytime she is popular lady doctor and in night she is a trapped animal in the hands of her husband, Manohar who is an English teacher in small college. The novel begins with Saritha returning after fifteen years to her father's house.⁹

Cultural Stereotypes

Sarita's early experiences as a little girl strongly inspired her desire to

⁷ Shashi Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 235.

⁸ J. Revathy and P. Suresh, 'Sarita's Decision and Its Consequences Portrayed in the Novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*', *Journal of Advanced Research in Dynamical and Control Systems*, vol. 10, no. 11 (2018), pp. 215–221.

⁹ A. Kavitha 'The Dark Holds No Terrors - An Introduction', *The Indian Review of World Literature in English*, vol. 2, no. 2 (July 2006), p. 3.

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become a forceful, dominant figure in her adult life. This drives her to pursue education, as it will provide a foundation for her self-determination. After graduating from high school, she pursues a university education and goes on to become a doctor. When one day she comes home from serving injured people with a blood-soaked coat, she makes no secret of her profession. Simply by virtue of her occupation, she is instantly more respectable than Manu. Those in her community know and trust her, and they frequently seek out her advice. Sarita's position disrupts the traditional order of husband as dominant and wife as subordinate. Sarita reflects,

...but now I know it was there it began this terrible thing that has destroyed our marriage. I know to that the human personality has an infinite capacity for growth. And so the esteem with which I was surrounded made me inches taller. But perhaps, the same thing that made me. Inches taller made him inches shorter. He had been the young man and I his bride. Now I was the lady doctor and he was my husband.¹⁰

Sarita here discusses the veracity of Indian culture. She further explains that an appropriate position for a wife is to always trail her husband, no more than a few paces behind. For instance, if he has a Masters degree, his wife should ideally have a Bachelors. If he is 5 feet 4 inches tall, then she should not exceed 5 feet 3 inches in height. If he makes 500 rupees a day, his wife's income should not be higher. That is the agreed upon dynamic that allegedly ensures a cheerful marriage. Ultimately, the wife's role is as a support for her husband's endeavours. Kavitha explains,

Sarita's distress prompts her to contemplate writing to the young students of her friend Nalu. She wishes she could enlighten them about the strict restrictions of tradition. Sarita's long hours of reflection on her marriage lead her to the conclusion that Manu's spirit had been extinguished by her professional success. In fact, her contemplation aids her in overcoming her guilt over the fact that she is to blame for Manu's current state. She is bold enough to go back her husband and cure him of his depression caused by inferiority complex and bring normal harmony in her family life.¹¹

This provides a more contemporary understanding of the position of men in hegemonic Indian society. The men in the novel recognise social struggles and present multiple masculinities. As stated by Revathy and Suresh, "Manu is clearly insecure about Sarita being famous and more successful than him.

¹⁰ Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p. 42.

¹¹ A. Kavitha, 'The Dark Holds No Terrors - An Introduction' p. 4.

Though Manu (Manohar) is a loving husband and a very responsible father being a literature student in his college and being a professor, he lives in the fancy world.”¹² They continue, “Despite all the inconveniences, they were leading their life happily in Bombay. The problem aroused when Sarita became famous in their place, it first started affecting their privacy. Later her fame made him feel truncated. It made him weak, which he always tried not to reveal in front of other people.”¹³

In the end, it is the interviewer who comes to interview Sarita who upsets the domestic balance. She openly mocks Manu by pointing out that Sarita is the breadwinner, making Manu feel like emasculated. “‘How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?’ ...And even then, when that girl said it, we just laughed, all three of us.”¹⁴ He is shaken by this, which is heightened by his inability to express his fears on the subject. In the interview, he comes across as laid-back, but his humiliation manifests in his behaviour in the domestic space. He becomes sexual sadist and begins to physically abuse Sarita every day.

This is the first instance where we see Manu as the victim of hegemonic masculinity. Through his newfound desire for sexual dominance, he attempts to assert that he is powerful and masculine in his relationship. This quickly turns from sexual desire to outright physical abuse. An incident takes place when friends try to mock him over Sarita’s more income. “‘If you had married a doctor,’ the wife said tartly, ‘you’d have gone to Ooty too.’”¹⁵ He began assaulting Sarita every night, which deeply affects both their relationships and their individual lives. When someone makes a joke about his money, his anger builds to the point that he starts a fight with his wife. Ravathy and Suresh explain that “He sees himself as a failure with a low standard.”¹⁶ When his wife is complimented on her career or salary, he develops an inferiority complex. Further,

He never talks about that to his wife. But it led him to a different level of psychological trauma. But the most important fact is that he never knows what he does to Sarita at night. If she has bruises due to the

¹² Revathy and Suresh, ‘Sarita’s Decision and Its Consequences Portrayed in the Novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*’, p. 2413.

¹³ Revathy and Suresh, ‘Sarita’s Decision and Its Consequences Portrayed in the Novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*’, p. 2413.

¹⁴ Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p. 200.

¹⁵ Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p. 111.

¹⁶ Revathy and Suresh, ‘Sarita’s Decision and Its Consequences Portrayed in the Novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*’, p. 2415.

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attack on the previous night, he will feel bad for that and without knowing the fact will advise her to be careful while doing her work.¹⁷

Manu finds his strength in Sarita's vulnerability, his power in her impotence, and his manhood in overcoming her. After the abuse escalates, Sarita eventually leaves Manu and returns to her parents' home. Manu is subsequently isolated, both due to his own issues with self-worth, and his actions towards his wife.

'We don't have to worry about a loan anymore.'

'Why?'

'Boozie's given me the money.'

'All of it?'

'Yes, all of it.'

'Why?' The word, the question seemed to hang in the air.¹⁸

Though he cares for his family, Manu keeps his financial struggles from his wife. Professor Boozie not only assists her financially while she was completing her medical degree, but also supports her in building a new clinic, for which Boozie paid the entire first year's rent. This bewilders Manu. Ravathy and Suresh again reflect,

He could not question her decisions or decide on his own in preventing her from getting money from him. His inferiority complex started to haunt him after this incident; it made the situation much shoddier. Even though he tried his best to reconcile with the normal situation, each time it takes its new form and haunts him. Thus, it makes him another victim of the decisions made by the woman.¹⁹

It is notable that this domestic disruption is unfamiliar in their domestic space up to this point. Sarita and Manohar were once madly in love with one another, though Sarita never allowed their relationship to keep her from reaching her professional goals. When they first meet, she has an instant and irrevocable crush on Manohar, but does not believe that he will return her feelings. In their first two meetings, he is Sarita's beauty and intelligence, including her ambitions to go into medicine. Manohar plans to marry her after discovering that she feels the same way about him. When Sarita's mother finds out about it, she makes it clear she does not approve of the marriage. Her mother consistently makes fun of her, saying that she would

¹⁷ Revathy and Suresh, 'Sarita's Decision and Its Consequences Portrayed in the Novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*', p. 2415.

¹⁸ Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p. 87.

¹⁹ Revathy and Suresh, 'Sarita's Decision and Its Consequences Portrayed in the Novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*', p. 88.

never meet anyone because of her skin colour. She is told by her mother, “You will never be good looking you are too dark for that...looking at yourself in the mirror! I’ll give you a certificate to say that you’re beautiful. Will that satisfy you! ...A wedding in midst of approving relations. Bowing down dutifully to all of them.”²⁰ Eventually, they marry without her parent’s approval, which results in her not having her parents’ support throughout their marriage. To begin with, she craves affection from her husband. “I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love. Of my being loved. Of my being wanted.”²¹ Her happiness knows no bounds after learning that Manohar is faithful to her and genuinely cares for her.

Following Manu’s emotional upheaval, however, their relationship crumbles, and their domestic environment becomes toxic. “Since coming home, she had almost ceased to think of herself as woman; a woman, that is with the attributes of attracting a man...I was tired always too tired after my long days at hospital. He was the same, still no eager to love me, so disappointed when I refused him that I nearly had heart to do so.”²²

Sarita then talks about her father. “No, no, nothing like that. But I didn’t know...I mean, I never imagined...’ His words trailed away. Suddenly she knew. It was his loyalty to the dead woman. He could not welcome her because that meant treachery to the dead.”²³ When Sarita returns home, she feels that her father has distanced himself. She later surmises that this is a result of the guilt he feels over the death of her mother, who would not have allowed Sarita to return home. As much as he cares for his daughter, he wants to respect his wife’s wishes regarding Sarita.

If Sarita’s father had spoken up or questioned his wife’s, they would not have become so estranged; indeed, it was this isolation that ultimately factored into her death. Sarita’s father eventually later makes amends and assists his daughter in overcoming her trauma, and eventually he helps her to reconcile with her children and husband.

It is not just Sarita’s father who struggles with their reconnection. Sarita herself finds herself frustrated with her father’s inability to stand up to his wife. The revelation that her father knew about his grandchildren, and still chose to stay away, troubles her deeply. She wonders if he would have

²⁰ Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p. 25.

²¹ Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p. 40.

²² Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p. 123.

²³ Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p. 19.

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ever reached out to them if she had not come to him first. Sarita's father strongly demonstrates issues with the masculine role in the domestic space. It is only after the death of his wife that he is able to make decisions for himself. In Indian society, a man is loved, respected, and appreciated only if he provides something. Once Sarita's father became too elderly to work, his wife became more domineering. "I had refused to think about it, but I knew...I told myself, sickened at the same time by my complacency."²⁴ This is what Sarita has remarked of her male friend Padmakar, another captive of hegemonic masculinity who is largely controlled by a woman. He is a prominent physician who becomes infatuated with a woman he meets. When he tells her about his unfortunate situation and how much he relies on Sarita, she is unimpressed. When she rejects him, he does not protest. This shows how patriarchy restricts the males to hold back their feelings and even if some unwanted situations appear their weak emotional intelligence deludes them. "It gives me pleasure, Sarita. It's an innocent happiness after all, isn't it?"²⁵

Further, Padmakar becomes infatuated with Sarita. No matter how much he tries to rationalise or abstain from his habit, he always gives in. His heart's deepest desire is for her to be his forever. When Sarita refuses to continue meeting with him and puts a stop to their conversations, he has no choice but to accept her decision without question. As the narrative progresses, he shows his weakness. "Sarita's decision takes the priority in meeting him too. It has become a habit for Padmakar to visit Sarita but he could never justify his habit nor resist himself from it."²⁶

Conclusion

Deshpande brilliantly explores a career woman's psychological struggles in the face of normative Indian domesticity. The novel also goes beyond female restrictions and highlights challenges that all humans face at some point in their lives. The dynamics between the male and female characters play a key role in the narrative, demonstrating issues faced by those on either side of masculinity.

It is important to identify the social conflicts through which subjugated

²⁴ Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p. 130.

²⁵ Deshpande, *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, p. 132.

²⁶ Revathy and Suresh, 'Sarita's Decision and Its Consequences Portrayed in the Novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors*', p. 40.

masculinities impact dominant patterns of society, as the paradigm of hegemonic masculinity does not always correspond to a system of social reproduction. In modern societies, gender impressed upon children from the moment they are born; by the time they are teens, their identities have invariably been shaped by their experiences with gender. There are a variety of masculinities, and we must abandon the simplistic interpretation of gender roles and attribute concepts that are implicit in many existing gender identity typologies. The purpose of this article has been to conduct an examination of how hegemonic masculinity plays a role in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, especially in how it depicts men's relationships with power and prevalent anxieties about boys and men. Ultimately, the novel provides several notable examples of the construct, validating the work laid out by Connell and Messerschmidt.