

Crisis of Masculinity and Middle-Class Economic Responsibilities in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time*

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* offers a careful and layered view of how masculinity forms and becomes unsettled under middle-class pressures in contemporary India. This paper studies how the novel connects masculine identity with financial responsibility, emotional strength and moral expectations of family life. Most scholars focus on Deshpande's portrayal of women's struggles, but less attention has been given to how her male characters face guilt, responsibility and vulnerability when they fail to meet the role of provider and moral guide. Using insights from R. W. Connell, Michael Kimmel and Indian scholars like Sanjay Srivastav and Ashis Nandy, this paper argues that Deshpande presents masculinity as a fragile identity shaped by economic pressures. Through a close analysis of Gopal's withdrawal, Suresh's rising frustration and middle-class concern with financial stability and respectability, this study highlights *A Matter of Time* as an important text in Indian masculinity studies. The analysis shows that masculine identity in the novel is formed in moments of crisis and is continually reshaped by economic stress, emotional strain and shifting cultural demands.

Keywords: Masculinity studies, middle-class masculinity, financial responsibility, emotional vulnerability, hegemonic masculinity, crisis of masculinity, cultural expectations, moral economy.

Introduction

Masculinity in Indian English fiction has emerged as a key lens for understanding transformations in society, family relationships, emotional expression and economic pressures. Within this growing field, Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* stands out for its sensitive and nuanced portrayal of how middle-class Indian men grapple with identity under pressure. The story opens with a moment of rupture: Gopal, a professor and the head of the family, suddenly leaves his home without giving any reason. This sudden and silent act generates emotional, financial and moral challenges for the women he leaves behind. Yet the novel does not treat Gopal as a villain; he rather appears as a man consumed by inner conflict, unable to articulate his despair and strained by social and family expectations. The middle-class Indian household especially in post-independence and late-twentieth-century India is shaped by values of stability, honour, education and financial discipline. Men were

taught to become bread winners, decision-makers and moral leaders. These expectations operate socially and symbolically turning a man's role as provider into the primary measure of his worth. In such setting, men find difficulty to express emotional vulnerability, leaving almost no room for confusion, failure or withdrawal. The present narrative analyses these rigid expectations. Gopal's withdrawal reveals emotional stress placed on him as a provider. His silence reflects not indifference but a sign of psychological strain. Men in the narrative present middle-class masculinity as performative, showing stability while suffering internally. This tension is central to the crisis of masculinity explored in the narrative. This paper reads *A Matter of Time* as an exploration of the moral and economic pressures shaping middle-class Indian masculinity. Deshpande does not portray men simply as patriarchal figures; she presents them as trapped by the same structure they uphold. Gopal, Suresh and Kalyani's recollections together reveal masculinity in the narrative is not stable and collapse when men suppress emotions and financial responsibilities. Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity regards male identity as a social product and maintained through power relations. Michael Kimmel argues that masculinity becomes uncertain when traditional male authority is challenged. Indian scholars like Sanjay Srivastav, Ashis Nandy and Uma Chakravarti claim that Indian middle-class masculinity highlights respectability, moral duty and psychological costs maintaining patriarchal order. These frameworks underline that the narrative deals not only with women's issues but also with men's inner turmoil. The paper situates the novel in a middle-class context to examine how economic and cultural conditions continually reshape masculinity.

Literature Review

Shashi Deshpande's fiction is broadly recognised for its feminist vision, its sensitive portrayal of women's inner world and its account of patriarchal norms. However, the study of masculinity in her work remains limited. Critics rarely explore how her novels portray the emotional, moral and economic pressures that shape men's lives in the Indian middle class. This paper surveys discussions on patriarchy, middle-class respectability, gender emotional labour and masculine crisis. It also identifies a central gap: the need to study *A Matter of Time* through male emotional struggle and economic responsibility. Early criticism on Deshpande strongly focused on women. Critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee, S. Prasanna Sree and K. Srilata highlighted the dilemmas faced by her female protagonists as they strive for autonomy within domestic settings. This focus established Deshpande as a major feminist voice but also produced a narrowing reading pattern. Her works came to be interpreted almost through women's experiences. As a result, the emotional and psychological journey of her male characters has received less attention.

In this context, Meenakshi Mukherjee notes that Indian women writers, Deshpande among them, bring women's turmoil and emotional strain to the centre of domestic narratives. She asserts that Deshpande's stories dwell on women's inner worlds, spaces shaped by loneliness, guilt, suppressed desire and suffering, while the

men in her works stay present in form but not in emotional depth. Similarly, S. Prasanna Sree points out that Deshpande shows women living under strong patriarchal expectations, carrying what she calls a “triple burden” of silence, conformity and emotional work. This approach, she adds, often frames men mainly as authority figure rather than as characters with their own complex feelings. Building on this idea, K. Srilata argues that Deshpande is particularly concerned with private and often unseen suffering of middle-class women. She draws attention to the imbalance in these households, where women absorb conflict and responsibility, while men remain centers to power whose emotional seldom explored. These readings indicate that Deshpande’s male characters are frequently pushed to the margins of the narrative, a pattern that aligns with broader trends noted in masculinity studies. In *A Matter of Time*, this imbalance becomes particularly significant.

Gopal’s sudden withdrawal marks the novel’s turning point. His exit reflects his emotional exhaustion and his fear of falling in his economic and moral duties. Ignoring this part leaves the narrative unexplored. Indian patriarchy differs from Western contexts, shaping masculinity in distinctive ways. Scholars such as Uma Chakravarti, Ashis Nandy and Sudhir Kakar argue that Indian masculinity forms at the intersection of caste hierarchy, relationships and constant social scrutiny. Chakravarti observes that patriarchy functions through a complex web of kinship, caste status and cultural respect,” making male authority both a private and a performance. This performance must be continuously validated through discipline, responsibility and moral conduct. Ashis Nandy extends this idea by describing Indian men living with divided self: outward control and inward suppress. This split reflects Gopal’s self. His withdrawal exposes the conflict between expected strength and hidden fear. Sudhir Kakar adds a psychological dimension, arguing that Indian masculinity is built on suppressing fear, desire and vulnerability. Men’s suppressed emotions and fear are seen when their sense of self is damaged under stress. This aligns with Gopal’s withdrawal. Sanjay Srivastav shows that Indian middle-class masculinity rests respectability and economic stability and failure to meet these ideals creates anxiety. Gopal’s position gives him respect but the wider demand of middle-class masculinity destroys his sense of stability. Sociologists like M. Rao, Patricia Uberoi and Leela Fernandes argue that the home becomes a key space where middle-class morality is tested. Men are judged not only by what they earn but by how well they maintain harmony and moral authority. Gopal’s fall highlights the fragility of masculinity.

Connell’s idea of masculinity as performance and Kimmel’s approach of its instability explain Gopal’s crisis. Other scholars like Sedgwick, Hearn and Pleck argue that masculinity depends on emotional control. Pleck’s “Male Role Strain” model shows how men suffer when they cannot meet cultural expectations. Gopal embodies this strain and his inner self breaks as he tries to do his duty. Scholars like Ashok Bery, Harish Trivedi and Chelva Kanganayakam now study masculinity more closely, but its role in Indian English fiction is still under explored Even though critics point out conflicts within male identity, Deshpande’s novels are mainly focused on women’s issues. Existing studies show this complexity but rarely use theoretical models such as hegemonic

masculinity or role strain. Research still overlooks Deshpande's male characters and breakdowns of middle-class masculinity in the present narrative. This paper fills these gaps, showing how Deshpande portrays masculinity as fragile, shaped by silence, responsibility and moral anxiety.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses three connected ideas to explain how masculinity is reflected in *A Matter of Time*. It reveals economic duty, emotional restraints and moral pressure that shape the lives of middle-class men. The concepts like hegemonic masculinity, crisis of masculinity and cultural perspectives clarify this process. Through these frameworks, Gopal's withdrawal appears not as a personal failure but as the breakdown of a wider gendered system of expectations. R. W. Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity contributes significantly to examine gender role through hierarchy and repeated actions. Connell argues that masculinity is not natural but a "configuration of practices" that men maintain their social power (71). This clarifies that masculinity is relational. It is shaped through men's interactions with women, with other men and with the institutions around them. This shows Gopal's withdrawal as a breakdown of these practices. He can no longer act as a provider, emotional support, intellectual guide and moral support to his family. Connell's idea of masculine instability supports Gopal's departure. When he disconnects from these roles, his structural identity begins to dissolve. Michael Kimmel's idea of the crisis of masculinity adds a psychological layer. He argues that men experience anxiety when their usual authority or privilege becomes difficult to sustain. In this context, masculinity becomes defensive. It hides fear or failure behind silence or withdrawal (Kimmel 132).

Seen this way, Gopal leaves not from lack of love but from burden created by the gap between his real self and his expected role. Expectations of income, stability and moral duty press on him. Indian perspectives further make this crisis even sharper. Ashis Nandy notes the divide between the outer self and the inner silent of Indian men (17). Gopal reveals this inner silence. Sanjay Srivastav explains that middle class respectability demands discipline and financial stability (26). Failure produces shame and guilt. Gopal's withdrawal reflects this burden, showing culturally shaped crisis of masculinity.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative method for analysing the text, based on close reading and careful interpretation. The reading focuses on key moments of male withdrawal and inner conflict. Special attention is given to Gopal's silence, Suresh's frustration and the responses of women in the narrative. The analysis examines tone, silence and emotional patterns. It also studies images of duty and responsibility in Deshpande's restrained prose. The study explores wider themes such as emotional control, middle-class anxiety and gender nature of silence. These themes are connected personal experiences with larger questions of masculinity and moral pressure. Ideas from Connell, Kimmel, Nandy and Srivastav support the analysis of how masculinity is shaped tested and

transform in the novel. The reading also places the text within the social world of the Indian middle-class. This combined approach reveals Deshpande's subtle portrayal of masculine crisis.

Analysis and Discussion

Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* presents a quiet yet powerful study of masculine crisis in the Indian middle-class. The novel shows emotional control, financial responsibility moral pressure shape men's lives. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that Deshpande reveals hidden tensions beneath everyday domestic life (54). These tensions appear in Gopal's inner collapse and in Suresh's firm decisions to control over his emotions. Gopal and Suresh represent the silent strain carried by men within the family and social order. Masculinity in this context is not stable or natural. Moreover, it appears as a fragile role shaped by economic pressure, emotional restraint and fear of failure. Gopal's withdrawal from his family sets the narrative in action. He leaves "without reason given, without reasons understood" (Deshpande 3). This silence shows his inability to express his anxiety that has burdened him for years. The narrator further asserts that "something within him had cracked long before he stepped out" (Deshpande 4). His departure is not impulsive. It rather marks the final step of a long inner breakdown. Although he works as a lecturer and holds social respect, he lacks the financial stability expected as a husband and a father. His emotionless nature describes as "living behind glass," which reflects the distance created by the long-term pressure to perform middle-class masculinity (Deshpande 18). Michael Kimmel's idea of as "fearful concealment" explains Gopal's behaviour. He hides his fragility behind his silence. Sharmila Rege adds that Deshpande's men are "trapped in the very authority they are expected to wield" (Rege 77). Gopal reflects this trap. His silence does not come from his lack of care but he is emotionally collapsed. When "words failed him long before courage did" (Deshpande 27), it shows how rigid gender roles block man's voice. Deshpande places this conflict inside the Indian middle-class moral world. Here man's value is judged through duty, income and honour. Gopal feels that life has "shrunk into a ledger of duties" (Deshpande 41). S Prasanna Sree observes that Deshpande's men often live under strict self-discipline and a constant fear of collapse (112). This insight aligns with Gopal. His departure breaks not only the family structure but also the moral code by which his masculinity is measured. Suresh presents another layer of masculinity. For him, responsibility is a rule that cannot be broken. On hearing of Gopal's departure, he says, "A man doesn't leave; a man holds thing together" (Deshpande 52). This belief reflects his strict nature and nurturing. It also shows how men are taught to hide emotion. His fear of failure reflects Gopal's fear in different form. Gopal's withdrawal and Suresh's strict nurturing reveal how fragile dominant masculinity becomes under the pressures of emotional and financial strain. Connell's idea of relational masculinity aligns with this tension. Connell argues that masculinity rests on roles and relations. This makes clear when Gopal feels like a "shadow walking beside the man once he was" (Deshpande 121). Without his social roles, he cannot recognise himself. His departure is not only physical exit but also a symbolic that collapse relational identity.

The title *A Matter of Time* is highly suitable that suggests how time is the best medicine over the crisis of masculinity and the burden of middle-class economic responsibility. Deshpande sets male fragility against female endurance. After Gopal's departure, Sumi restores the household. Kalyani observes that women often repair what men abandon (Deshpande 89). This contrast does not praise women as naturally strong. It shows how emotional labour is unequally shared. Women are trained to endure. Men are taught to control. When control breaks, men are left without inner resources. This shows that masculine failure and survival are shaped by time.

The novel questions the belief that patriarchy only grants power to men. Deshpande shows that patriarchal masculinity is also fragile. It demands emotional restraint, moral certainty and economic success. These ideas are difficult to sustain. Masculinity, in this context, becomes a site of pressure. It stands between duty and exhaustion, authority and fear, appearance and collapse. In this way, masculinity is closely associated with middle-class economic duty. Gopal and Suresh fail to maintain it differently. Deshpande's portrayal is empathetic but critical. She presents masculinity not as a stable power, but as a tense and often painful struggle between personal limits and social expectations.

Conclusion

This study shows that *A Matter of Time* presents a careful exploration of the crisis of masculinity under middle-class economic pressure. Gopal's departure and Suresh's inner control and the restoration of women during the crisis expose profound contradictions within patriarchy. Masculinity appears as a fragile and shifting identity. It depends on performance rather than inner stability. It bends under moral and financial demands that men sometimes fail to sustain. Using insights from Connell's hegemonic masculinity, Kimmel's crisis theory and Indian perspectives on male identity, this paper argues that Deshpande's portrayal is psychological and socio-cultural. Masculinity breaks not because men lack strength but the roles given to them allow little room for uncertainty, emotion or vulnerability. Gopal's withdrawal reveals the limits of a system that ties masculinity to control. Suresh's self-monitoring shows how middle class men continue to fear moral failure and loss of authority. Finally, this study shows how to rethink masculinity beyond dominance. Masculinity is shown as a space shaped by duty, anxiety, silence and longing. Men experience privilege and pain within this space. The novel *A Matter of Time* becomes important not only for understanding gender as a system of power but also as a struggle for meaning, connection and emotional survival.

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