
Fatherhood and the idea of the Masculine: A study of select texts by Indian Writers

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Abstract: The paper aims to study and analyse the idea of fatherhood and father-child relationships in the Indian context, focusing primarily on how the idea of masculinity affects the psyche of the father and the child. A literary analysis has been done of select works pertaining to different familial contexts in order to form a nuanced understanding of a father and the struggles associated with the role. Additionally, discussing how the role is affected by societal and personal expectations. The research is focused on novels written by Indian authors, namely, *Dark Holds No Terrors* by Sashi Deshpande, *Sepia Leaves* by Amandeep Sandhu and *Family Life: A Novel* by Akhil Sharma.

Keywords: Indian, Masculine, Fathering, Fatherhood, Child.

Introduction:

The term ‘father’ comes from the old English word ‘fæder’ meaning “he who begets a child” or “one who exercises parental care over another”. From the parent term, the following two terms emerge, fatherhood and fathering. Fatherhood refers to the social and legal status of a person, while fathering refers to the responsibilities that fatherhood brings, along with the caring or nurturing activities that are often, though not inevitably, associated with it.

When a parent-child relationship is generally discussed, mostly the mother is seen as the primary caregiver and the father is looked at as the distant parent or the financial provider. The significance of the father, either negative or positive, is often sidelined or ignored. The relationship is much more nuanced. Throughout fiction, father characters are mostly seen representing themselves in different roles, as an individual and as a partner but their presence as a father often takes a back seat. The variety in representation does give us an insight into the concept of Indian fatherhood. The characters have been varied on different levels, with respect to time and other cultural contexts. Their characteristics have been constantly changing pertaining to the evolution of society and family structures.

Traditionally, fathers have been seen as protectors and providers of the family. This role involves ensuring that the child's material needs are met and they are safeguarded from all kinds of harm. During the process of providing for the child, we often see fathers drifting away from the child itself. Indian fathers, in particular, are either not expected to provide emotional support or drift away due to their responsibilities, therefore a gap is created which many a times seems impossible to fill. In the last few decades, a major change has been observed in the responsibilities associated with the role. The shift makes it more important to study the meaning of fatherhood in terms of the evolving idea of masculinity and gender roles.

As stated above, the identity of a father is an amalgamation of different roles that he plays. A father is not merely a parent but also a man, a man who is influenced and affected by the society around him. The dilemma arises when biologically, they are inclined to care for and nurture their children but, culturally and socially, they are expected to keep a wall around them to act like a "man". The idea of masculinity and the social expectation not only affects the father but the child as well. The paper aims to take up the aforementioned concerns and evaluate them by analysing varied narratives. The narratives studied for the research are *Dark Holds No Terrors* by Sashi Deshpande, *Sepia Leaves* by Amandeep Sandhu and *Family Life: A Novel* by Akhil Sharma.

In the novel, *Dark Holds No Terrors* by Sashi Deshpande, the story revolves around Sarita and her struggles with different relationships. Since her childhood, she had a very challenging relationship with her mother and it remained tainted till her mother's death. A while after her mother's death, she returns to her maternal home, back to her father. And the first words that he utters after seeing her are, "I did not expect you" (Deshpande).

These words set the tone and give us an insight into the relationship that they share. The bond lacks all sorts of expectations with a constant state of indifference. Sarita always felt very distant from him. She feels frustrated about how her father never understood her or took a stand for her in front of her domineering mother, and even now as an adult she is not able to express her struggles to him. She believes that he doesn't even have the capacity to understand those emotions. The father, on the other hand, seems very disinterested and distant. He tried to be a good parent and a good partner but could never put across his desires. Though he has always done his traditional duties as a father and provided financially for her, the lack of emotional connection is very evident.

When Sarita observes the fatherly bond that her father shares with the college student Madhav and his protective nature towards him, she gets hurt and says, The smile he offered Madhav carried pure affection with it. It gave her a jolt. To her, he had always been a negative man, incapable of strong feelings. But if he could smile that way....? (Deshpande)

She sees love and affection in his eyes which has always been absent for her. This

shift in her father, who has always been a submissive partner and distant father, not only hurts Sarita but also angers her. While describing his temperament she says, “Even his mistakes and omissions were unimportant because they could never affect anyone else”. All her life, she craved for him to take a stand for her, speak in her favour and show concern and care, which he never did. Moments like these confuse us, as readers, and make us question if he is unable to express his emotions or if he is truly indifferent towards her.

There is a constant dilemma throughout the story. Sarita, as a child, wanted her father to care for her and be her strength and having seen him as a weak man and the weaker partner in marriage, is enraging for her. On the other hand, the father who has always been in the shadow of his wife, who could not, either, support his child or her opinions, is now being seen as a different man with Madhav. His role as a father is more evident with Madhav, where there are no expectations from him, as a father or as a man.

Whereas, in the autobiographical narrative *Sepia Leaves* by Amandeep Sandhu, the father, Yashpal is depicted as a gentle and kind man, who is taking care of his wife and their son Appu, while navigating through schizophrenia his wife is suffering from. Throughout the narrative, we see the man selflessly and lovingly managing every struggle, dealing with his wife’s state and trying to be both the parents for his child, irrespective of everyone’s opinion about him. Appu grew up in a dysfunctional household, where food was cooked and clothes were washed on a need-to-need basis. He is a child who loves his mom but is also scared of her. He is struggling to understand why his mother acts like two completely different individuals at times, sometimes like a lovely mother and other times like a maniac. He also sees his father struggling because of this.

Yashpal, a kind and sensitive man, is being constantly accused and criticised by his family, for being too soft with his wife. An incident which shakes the entire narrative is that on one particular day, during one of the schizophrenic episodes, Appu’s mother hits Yashpal. While Yashpal tries to calm his wife down, Appu’s reaction to the incident is noteworthy. Even though he loves his mother and has always felt bad when his father was criticized by his family, by looking at his father being hit by her, he is infuriated and angry. He is frustrated at his father for acting so weak. In that moment of anger and rage, he even wants his father to act violently and hit his mother back.

This shows that the social expectations and notions about a man, not only affect the man but also are deeply ingrained in the mind of children as well. Showcasing how the child also has certain fixed notions about the idea of manhood and manliness and instead of being proud of his father, he is frustrated and could not comprehend why his father never hits her back. Again, the dilemma arises, about what kind of father a child desires or needs and are his desires, actually inherent and disconnected from the social notions of who a man is and how a father should act and be.

R. Sriram in “Setting the Scene: The Need for Focus on Fathers and Fathering” gives

reference to a Canadian study on primary caregiver fathers by Doucet which talks about, “the need to move beyond the debate of gender differences and similarities in parenting and highlights unique, positive masculine qualities they bring to parenting, by altering the meaning of these responsibilities.”. The child will benefit from multiple caregivers and confining their roles according to the norms will only hinder the development of the child. In both these narratives, the characters are opposite in terms of their emotional expression and availability. But the constant struggle and inability to understand and how to act can be vividly seen. Additionally, it has also been established that the child is not unaffected by those social norms and his expectations are formed accordingly.

Another father character who becomes crucial to our understanding is from an autobiographical work *Family Life: A Novel* by Akhil Sharma. The narrative talks about an immigrant family living in New York and how after a major accident with their elder son, the whole family struggles financially and emotionally. The mother is fully devoted to the son’s care, the father is either working for the money, or drinking and putting everything on stake, while the younger son is left neglected. The narrative is from the younger child Ajay’s perspective. Seeing his father, emotionally distant and struggling with grief, he can not associate how he thought of him as his hero at one point. The distance that he feels is concretised when he says, “I used to think my father had been assigned to us by the government.”(Sharma 10). The extent of disconnection is such that the child doesn’t even associate an emotional bond with his father, good or bad, rather he sees him as an outsider who, out of necessity, has to act like a father to him, at times.

A qualitative study “To Parent or Provide? The Effect of these Provider Role on Low-Income Men’s Decisions About Fatherhood and Paternal Engagement” by D.M. Bryan discusses the conflicts in the mind of fathers about the kind of role they need to play. The idea of masculinity which is prevailing in society makes them uncomfortable to be loving and caring and makes it difficult for them to embrace their feminine side. They are expected to portray themselves as powerful individuals seeking obedience and not love and affection from women as well as children.

The different kinds of characters and varied familial contexts that we discussed, give us an insight into very different types of fathers, kind and loving, distant and disinterested and weak and submissive. A common factor among all is they being torn apart between being emotionally present parents and sticking to the stereotypical identity of a man. The dilemma arises from the idea of masculinity being too rigid and being strictly associated with the idea of a man.

With reference to a survey done by R. Sriram in *Fathering in India*, we saw Indian fathers being open and free about their emotions and even enthusiastic about their roles as fathers. In addition to the rapid changes in the roles of fathers, with them embracing the traditional motherly aspects, it is pertinent that fathering is not limited to being a masculine and feminine trait. With time, the term has evolved to become a rather, gender neutral

concept. With the acceptance of single parenthood and change in family structure, the lines between mothering and fathering have gotten blurred and hence there is a need to widen the horizon beyond the traditional idea of fatherhood.

The social, cultural and economical factors play a major role in the creation of the idea of fatherhood and emerging scenarios redefine the concept of fathering. The evolving idea of the institution of fatherhood may or may not lead to the idea of an ideal father, an ideal father dealing with individual and social struggles may or may not lead to him to understanding the true essence of the concept of fathering and the concept of fathering is not entirely limited to the institution of fatherhood.

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