

Research Article

Women's Trauma, New Woman, and Its Impact on Children and Society: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Select Fiction

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Accepted version published on 5 April 2026

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19427046>

Abstract: Modernization and Urbanization have a visible impact on the man-woman relationship, families, and typically on children. It has challenged the typical family's gender roles, structures, and age-old societal conventions. As one of the prominent feminist writers of India, Sashi Deshpande has portrayed the lives of women who were once suppressed, depressed, and traumatized, and how they finally come to live on their own terms, much like Sarah Grand's *New Woman* in almost all of her novels. To name a few, *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980), *That Long Silence* (1988), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *The Binding Vine* (1992), *Moving on* (2004), *Shadow Play* (2013), *Strangers to Ourselves* (2015), etc. This paper thus examines the representation of women's trauma, single-parenting, and its wider psycho-sociological impact on family, relationships, and especially on the development of the children. It suggests that children growing up in such tense and emotionally unavailable parental households often internalize fear and insecurity, which ultimately influences the broader social structure.

Keywords: Modernisation; Urbanisation; Suppression; Trauma; New Woman

Introduction

Children are the future of our society, and within the familial structure, women are widely regarded as the nurturers, the shapers of children. However, parenting is a gender-neutral role, in which the mother takes on the responsibilities of nurturing and supporting children's emotional well-being, and the father protects and shapes their discipline. Still, parenting is mostly looked at by women in our traditional Indian society, as most men get to spend less time with their family due to their job purposes. However, the processes of modernization, globalization, and urbanization have significantly transformed family structures and parental roles. The increasing prevalence of dual-income households and the growing discourse on gender equality have challenged conventional expectations surrounding parenting and marital relationships. These societal changes have also introduced new dynamics into relationships between men and women, particularly regarding issues of adjustment, compromise, and sacrifice—roles that women have historically performed silently within conventional family structures (Chaudhuri, 2013).

Shashi Deshpande's Fiction: A Discussion

In contemporary times, however, many women are increasingly unwilling to continue making unilateral sacrifices within relationships where their contributions are undervalued or unrecognized" (Chaudhuri, 2013). Women often experience emotional and psychological strain not only from their spouses but also from members of the extended family, particularly in-laws, while attempting to conform to traditional expectations of adjustment and compromise. Consequently, a growing number of women are choosing separation or divorce from abusive marital relationships rather than continuing to endure such circumstances out of fear of societal judgment or solely for the sake of the welfare of their children. Women today are increasingly unwilling to sacrifice their dreams and personal dignity for a family environment where their value is constantly questioned, where their work is not appreciated and acknowledged. This shift has contributed to the rise of single-parent households. A single parent may be either a mother or a father, but in most cases, mothers receive custody of the children. Consequently, single mothers often have to shoulder responsibilities that were traditionally performed, fulfilled, and expected from a male partner.

The burden of simultaneously fulfilling caregiving and financial responsibilities can expose single mothers to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and psychological strain. According to available reports, approximately 5 percent of households in India are headed by a single parent (Census of India, 2011; Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2021), with women constituting the majority in this category, with around 84.3 per cent of households headed by single mothers, while only about 15.7 per cent of households are headed by lone fathers. These figures suggest that women continue to bear the primary responsibility for child-rearing and maintaining the socio-economic stability of their families. In earlier times, one possible explanation for this pattern was that men were comparatively more likely to remarry, often leaving children in the care and custody of their mothers. Though women are also remarrying a new

partner, it has many detrimental effects on the children the women had with their past partner. As children grow up with the thought that their present parent is not the original one to whom they belong. Moreover, if they had a stepbrother or stepsister, they may not receive enough care from their step-parent. The children also suffer from loneliness alone. Many even commit suicide for societal judgments, friends', relatives', and neighbors' negative commentaries on their family. In the global context, the United States records one of the highest proportions of children living in single-parent households, estimated at around 23 percent. However, there are several other reasons why women are choosing to establish and maintain their own households as single mothers. These include male migration, divorce, marital separation, widowhood, intimate partner violence, abandonment, and the desire for personal independence. At the same time, women are also aware of their children's mental health, as if the mother remarries, the children may suffer from adjusting to a step-parent and their family. Additionally, certain legal constraints and prevailing social conventions that discourage or restrict women from remarrying or entering new relationships also contribute to the formation of single-mother households. Collectively, through the help of a few of Sashi Deshpande's novels, some factors play a significant role in explaining why many women choose—or are compelled—to head their own families as lone mothers.

Starting from *Dark Holds No Terror* (1980), the story of Sarita, a successful lady doctor, who leaves her husband Manohar, an English teacher, due to his torture. She then realized her mother's submissive nature towards men and her unending search for love from her strained relationship with her husband. Later, she reflects on her past, her identity, and what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal setup. Eventually, she comes to terms with many of her fears, rejects self-blame, and finds her own inner strength. She epitomizes the struggles of contemporary Indian working-class women in both the household and the workplace.

In *That Long Silence* (1988), Deshpande portrayed Jaya, a married woman who used to be a good writer, who lived for many years in a "long silence"- sacrificing much of her own voice, desires, and ambitions for family, for being a good wife and mother. Like all other conventional Indian women, she began to think of her husband as a sheltering tree, and that the duty of a wife lies in keeping her husband and his family happy after marriage. She began to believe that her real happiness does not lie in self-love but rather in keeping the people around her happy. For this, she even changed her identity, adopting the name Suhasini. However, eventually, Jaya realizes Mohan has lost interest in her and begins treating her like a non-entity. All the while, a significant emotional gap builds between them, made worse by silence and lack of communication. Jaya then began struggling with memories, her lost aspirations, and insecurities. She meets Mr Kamat, a widower living above her flat, who helps her think about herself within and outside her marriage. She opens up to him about her problems, which ultimately leads to their relationship becoming physical. With Kamat's encouragement and support, she renews her writing and soon emerges as a new writer. Thus, she resolves that she will no longer let that long silence define her; she tries to speak up, redefine her identity, and reassert her relationship on her own terms.

In her 1996 novel, *A Matter of Time*, though Deshpande placed a male character, **Gopal**, in the central role, she explores how his wife, **Sumi**, is left to cope with both the patriarchal difficulties and emotional trauma when he abandons his family. She had no other option but to return to her ancestral home in Bangalore to raise her three daughters, despite facing societal judgments. The story explores how relationships, identity, duty, and independence evolve when one's life is disrupted. Thus, it also critiques traditional gender roles, focusing on women's resilience as they rebuild their lives and highlighting the multigenerational impact of love and loss.

Deshpande's 2004 novel, *Moving On*, explores how the past and trauma linger on in people's lives. Here, the protagonist, Manjari, grows up in a traditional extended household. She witnesses her parents' strained relationship, their secrets, and tensions. As an adult, she struggles to break free from those inherited patterns. After her father's death, she returns to her ancestral house and discovers her father's secret diary. She then re-evaluates her childhood memories and family life, shedding light on her past events and unresolved issues. The novel thus focuses on how love, betrayal, duty, and loss shape women's lives, and on how "moving on" is often about accepting the past rather than forgetting it.

About all the above novels by Deshpande, we can see why contemporary, educated women are choosing an independent life over taking on any responsibility for a familial life. Women are also ready to be a single mother to a child or more with the help of donor insemination. However, they are not willing to suffer in silence or to be taken for granted, and they realize their self-worth, identity, and happiness. On the other hand, single parenthood lacks societal support, leading to a heavy parenting load. Balancing work and life, single parents often find it's difficult to spend quality time with their children. As a result, single-parent children not only struggle academically but also struggle to cope with a society lacking emotional and behavioral support.

Research shows that the environment determines a child's growth and development. American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, in his Ecological Model, discussed how the environment affects a child's development through five levels: Micro-system, Meso-system, Exo-System, Macro-system, and Chrono-system. It indicated that Children's development can be adversely affected by familial instability. A child's not only mental health but also physical health, overall development, and future relationships are impacted by the absence of one parent or by the disputes between separated or divorced parents. Research on cognitive development and academic performance revealed that children raised in single-parent households perform worse academically and in creative work. They are also often found to be less motivated than the children raised by both parents. It may be caused by parents' lack of engagement with them in school activities and in society. Parental involvement in school encourages children to maintain a positive attitude towards learning and reduces absences. On the other hand, parents also suffer economically and socially. As the family's income decreases, the single parent has to work more hours to provide adequately for the family, resulting in a lack of social engagement for both the child and the parent. They

lose their social support networks, including their grandparents, friends, neighbors, and teachers.

Single parents' lack of time for the child and engagement with the child often leads children to face stress, anxiety, and despair alone, resulting in behavioral issues like resentment, rage, and disobedience. The children also suffer from low self-esteem and negative self-image, making them fearful of rejection and abandonment, especially single-father-headed children. Single-father children are likely to lack emotional support the most, leading them to hide things from their father. As a result, children from single-parent households have higher rates of delinquency. Moreover, children from divorced parents are prone to depression, have the highest risk of suicidal thoughts and suicidal attempts. Since the single parent has to work long hours to provide for the family, they end up spending less time parenting. For this reason, the children from single-parent households crave affection, attention, and validation from external people, which most of the time leads them towards alcoholism, substance abuse, unplanned pregnancy, and mental health issues. As these children lack the quality time and mentorship from their parents, they are easily manipulated by others. Parents serve as role models for their children; children learn and try to imitate everything they see their parents do. So, parental divorce hinders the development of children's social and communication skills, even when one of the parents is available to them. Because of their poor communication skills, they struggle to make new friends and to have fulfilling personal relationships. The absence of a role model for long-term relationships in their lives leads them to struggle in future partnerships and other relationships. Moreover, these children are more likely to be addicted to social media to stay away from loneliness and boredom. As a result, they may invite wrong connections in their life and can become the victim of cyberbullying, unwarranted influences from different websites, and social media.

Conclusions

To conclude, single parenting has lots of pernicious effects on both the parent and the child, beginning from social, physical, and mental instability to behavioral and cognitive issues, poor academic, creative, and cultural performance resulting from negative self-image, and poor self-esteem. However, few studies have also highlighted the positive impacts of single parenting on children. When children observe their single parent working diligently to provide for the family, they often develop a strong sense of responsibility toward their household. Such experiences may also contribute to greater emotional maturity, increased problem-solving abilities, resilience, and more active participation in family decision-making. These positive influences can play a significant role in shaping children from single-parent households into responsible global citizens. Through their lived experiences, they often become more reflective about the hardships they have faced and develop a deeper sense of empathy and social awareness. Consequently, they may aspire to contribute to a society in which others do not have to experience similar difficulties as they have.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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