

## Culture Under Scrutiny: Illuminating Dark Corners Of Child Abuse In Witness The Night

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### *Abstract*

This research paper delves into the intricate interplay between the cultural context and pervasive patriarchy within Kishwar Desai's novel, *Witness the Night* (2010). Focusing on the exploration of gender dynamics and the abuse of girls under 16 years of age, the study unveils the subtle and overt ways in which patriarchy perpetuates an abusive society in India. Employing a comprehensive analysis of the narrative, the paper underscores the role of patriarchal structures in facilitating both systemic and individual abuse against girls, while shedding light on the phenomenon of victim blaming that ensnares victims further. The examination of these interrelated themes accentuates the urgent need for institutionalised change and reform within the cultural and social landscape. By elucidating the complex web of gender-based power dynamics and its implications, this research underscores the imperative of dismantling patriarchal structures to foster a society that upholds gender equity and protects the rights and dignity of women.

Keywords: Child Abuse, Exploitation, Patriarchy, Gender, Culture, India, Influence, Victim.

### **Introduction**

In the dark crevices of society where child abuse thrives, the insidious influence of patriarchy casts a long and oppressive shadow. Kishwar Desai, a perceptive literary voice, has long turned her gaze toward unveiling the intertwining complexities of gender, power, and exploitation. Her novel *Witness the Night*, takes centre stage, delving deep into the cultural contexts that enable the exploitation of women in contemporary Indian society. As a prolific author and social commentator, Desai's oeuvre has consistently resonated with concerns that reflect the poignant realities of gender-based child

abuse, and *Witness the Night* is a powerful testament to her commitment to unravelling these intricate narratives. Set against the evocative backdrop of the northern state of Punjab, the novel thrusts readers into a world where trauma and patriarchy converge, as seen through the lens of Simran Singh, a social worker driven by a relentless pursuit of justice. Within this chilling narrative, Desai masterfully employs the narrative device of flashbacks, unveiling the tormenting past of the novel's 14 year old protagonist, Durga Atwal. Framed for the murder of her entire family, Durga's memories serve as harrowing testaments to the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that have enabled the exploitation and abuse of women within her society.

Desai's remarkable ability to craft characters as vessels of societal struggles shines through in the embodiment of Durga and Simran. By interweaving their experiences with a larger cultural tapestry, the author magnifies the individual battles women face within the overarching realm of patriarchy. Themes of gender discrimination, societal norms, and the disturbing silences surrounding child abuse converge to form the thematic nucleus of Desai's narrative. This powerful novel encapsulates the essence of Desai's literary activism, calling attention to the intricate web of cultural contexts that perpetuate the maltreatment of girls and women. Through a meticulously crafted narrative, she underscores the ways in which cultural norms, societal expectations, and deeply ingrained gender biases culminate in an environment conducive to exploitation. This paper illuminates not only the poignant narratives of Durga and Sharda but also the broader implications for a society grappling with the complex interplay of patriarchy and abuse.

### **Literature Review**

The interconnection between patriarchy, culture, gender, and abuse within societies has been a subject of significant academic inquiry. Various scholars have extensively studied this intersection, shedding light on the nuanced dynamics that contribute to gender-based disparities and the perpetuation of abuse. Kohli (2017) emphasises that patriarchy fosters gender inequality by privileging males over females. This system impacts various aspects of women's lives, from education and healthcare to economic opportunities. Dasgupta (1987) highlights selective discrimination against female children in rural Punjab, underscoring the adverse effects of gender bias. Agnihotri (1996) delves into juvenile sex ratios in India, indicating a pattern of female neglect and discrimination. Basu (1993) discusses women's roles and the gender gap in health and survival, revealing how cultural dynamics influence women's access to healthcare and

overall well-being. Coale (1991) presents the concept of excess female mortality, shedding light on the consequences of gender bias for women's survival. Krishnamoorthy (2006) explores gender disparities in India, connecting these disparities to health outcomes, education, and socio-economic factors. Krishnaji (1987) delves into poverty and sex ratios, highlighting the relationship between economic factors and the neglect of female children.

The intersection of patriarchy, culture, and gender intersects with abuse in profound ways. Szołtysek et al. (2016) develop the Patriarchy Index, which quantifies the historical impact of gender inequality and demonstrates its consequences for generational inequities. Dollar and Gatti (1999) examine the relationship between gender inequality, income, and growth, showing that pervasive gender disparities hinder overall economic development. Chatterjee and Ghosh (2001) discuss a district development index, revealing how patriarchal norms can impact the distribution of resources and opportunities. In the context of India, where patriarchy and gender inequality persist, these references collectively emphasise the need for comprehensive reforms to address abuse and inequity. This literature review underscores the complexity of patriarchal systems, how they intersect with culture and gender, and the urgency of dismantling these structures to create a more equitable and just society. It highlights the significance of understanding cultural contexts to develop effective strategies for combating abuse and promoting gender equality. While the reviewed studies have extensively explored the intersections of patriarchy, culture, and gender, they predominantly focus on understanding these dynamics in isolation or within broader frameworks. However, there appears to be a gap in the literature that addresses the specific mechanisms through which cultural norms and patriarchal structures directly contribute to perpetuating abuse against women in contemporary India.

### **Methodology**

This research undertakes a cultural exploration to delve into the intricate dynamics of patriarchy, culture, gender, and abuse within the context of Kishwar Desai's novel, *Witness the Night*. The focal point of this investigation is the portrayal of the societal factors that contribute to the exploitation of women and children within contemporary Indian society. The research approach is centred solely on the analysis of the novel as the primary source of data. Through a detailed examination of the text, this study aims to unearth recurring themes, patterns, and instances that shed light on the complex interplay of patriarchy and gender inequalities, leading to the perpetuation of abuse. This exploration is guided by a thematic

analysis, which involves identifying and categorising key themes that emerge from the text. The findings will be interpreted in the broader context of cultural norms and socio-economic structures prevalent in India. Ultimately, this qualitative study seeks to provide an insightful perspective on how cultural contexts within the novel contribute to the abuse of women and children, contributing to discussions on the need for transformative changes within the societal fabric.

### **Patriarchal Family Structure**

Patriarchy in the Indian culture is deeply embedded and manifests through various norms, traditions, and practices that perpetuate male dominance and female subordination (Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021). The novel *Witness the Night* illuminates a central and prevailing theme revolving around the deeply entrenched patriarchal family structure within the Atwal family, effectively creating a backdrop that facilitates the tragic child abuse experienced by the two sisters. This family structure, intricately linked to the gender dynamics of the society in which they reside, finds resonance in scholarly discussions on patriarchal culture and gender discrimination. The Atwal family's deeply rooted patriarchal structure manifests in a sinister practice where the male members exploit young girls under the guise of labour on the family farm. This practice is enabled by the prevailing gender hierarchy, where the sons' authority and privilege grant them the power to buy and misuse girls for their personal gratification. These girls were involved in a distressing and coercive routine that involves their involuntary participation in nightly activities orchestrated by a male figure. The rationale behind these actions is summarised in the assertion that, as boys, they are entitled to engage in leisurely pursuits, as indicated by the statement "they were boys and needed to have some fun" (Desai, 2010, p. 73). The deeply ingrained gender norms and unequal power dynamics within the family contribute to the perpetuation of this exploitative practice. Patriarchy affords the male members an unquestioned dominance, allowing them to manipulate and subjugate the vulnerable girls in their care. This reprehensible practice exemplifies how patriarchy not only enables the gendered child abuse of girls but also normalises such exploitative behaviour within the family unit.

The depiction of Santji's abusive treatment towards his wife serves as a poignant example of the consequences of such a patriarchal structure. Desai's evocative description, "We all remembered the time she did not appear at the dining table, her eyes turned silently towards the window as she lay in bed till the scars healed" (Desai, 2010, p. 153), underscores the silenced suffering endured by women subjected to such dominance. This portrayal resonates with the

intersectionality of gender discrimination explored by Rosida and Rejeki (2017), highlighting how patriarchal cultures perpetuate power imbalances and reinforce the marginalisation of women.

Additionally, the novel exposes the grim practice of female foeticide within the Atwal family, reflecting the disturbing consequences of the devaluation of daughters. The chilling narrative of infant girls being murdered and buried behind the family's residence in Jullundur points out the lack of value assigned to daughters perpetuates gender-based violence and inequality. Durga's haunting memory of her sister's revelation of "a skeletal spirit hand" of a buried baby encapsulates the harrowing cycle of violence perpetuated by the patriarchal structure (Desai, 2010, p. 153). Moreover, the hasty decision to institutionalise Sharda upon her pregnancy outside of wedlock further underscores the gendered implications of such a structure. The mere revelation that her child is male spares him from the harsh fate that would have befallen a daughter in a society that upholds patriarchal norms. This decision reflects the outcomes of gender inequality and discrimination portrayed by Kohli (2017), where societal norms and practices are skewed against women.

### **Entrenched Son Preference**

The entrenched preference for a son over a daughter in Indian culture is deeply rooted in historical, social, and economic factors (Klaus & Tipandjan, 2014). This bias, known as "son preference," has been perpetuated through generations and manifests itself in various aspects of Indian society. Embedded within the narrative's exploration lies a profound connection to the cultural mindset that perpetuates the notion of sons' superior worth over daughters, a manifestation tightly woven into the patriarchal framework. This intricate dynamic is demonstrated within the Atwal family, a prominent and high-caste Punjabi household that vigorously upholds traditional norms favouring male offspring. As elucidated by the narration, the Atwals' unwavering dedication to the prominence of boys over girls is poignantly encapsulated: "My father was crazy for sons, and so was my mother. So they got all the attention" (Desai, 2010, p. 69). The emphasis on producing a male heir within this context is unequivocal, evident in the adoption of an orphan boy named Rahul, who is disguised as a girl, referred to as "Guddi," to avert the perceived "evil eye" (Desai, 2010, p. 207). The narrative further reveals the gravity of this predisposition when Binny, Jitu's British-Indian wife, confronts immense pressure to bear a son. This is exemplified by the family's reaction upon learning of her impending daughter through an ultrasound, compelling them to push Binny for the termination of the foetus. Such engrained biases resonate with

the findings of Rosida and Rejeki (2017), who underscore the link between gender discrimination and patriarchal constructs. The pervasive preference for male progeny invariably contributes to unequal power dynamics, where sons enjoy more substantial opportunities and privileges compared to their female counterparts. In parallel, Santji, the authoritative patriarch within the Atwal family, exemplifies this power imbalance by exerting complete control over consequential decisions and meticulously orchestrating the lives of the women under his domain. The overarching patriarchal dominance evident in familial contexts mirrors a systemic imbalance, serving to curtail women's agency and autonomy.

The deeply entrenched preference for sons invariably nurtures an environment that fosters the maltreatment and disregard of Durga and Sharda. Santji's conspicuous disregard for Durga's well-being is exemplified by his enduring neglect and emotional aloofness towards her, substantiating her marginalisation within the family since her early years. This relegation accentuates the deeply ingrained perception of her as an insignificant entity due to her gender. Similarly, the harrowing ordeal experienced by a 16 year old Sharda, culminating in her institutionalisation due to an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, starkly illuminates the family's prioritisation of societal shame over her welfare. However, upon learning that Sharda was going to have a boy, her family let her live: "That, incidentally, is why Sharda survived. Her ultrasound at the asylum showed that she was going to have a son"(Desai, 2010, p. 96). The confluence of these manifestations effectively underscores how entrenched son preference becomes a fulcrum that amplifies the girls' susceptibility to exploitation, particularly within the hands of male family members.

### **Restrictions on Women's Sexuality**

The presence of restrictions imposed on female sexuality within the framework of patriarchal norms in India reflects deeply seated in cultural paradigms (Chakravarti, 2002). In this context, societal perceptions of honour, purity, and family reputation are intertwined with gendered expectations, leading to the constraining of women's sexual agency. The novel's narrative further accentuates the presence of restrictions imposed on female sexuality within the framework of patriarchal norms, underscoring the facilitation of abusive dynamics. In the case of Sharda, the discovery of her involvement with an individual from a lower caste exposes the intricate intertwining of notions of honour and the perpetuation of abuse: "It was to do with our high caste and stature and the low caste and status of the man she wanted to be with. It was to do with her being a witch and a snake child and disobedient"(Desai, 2010, p. 69). This phenomenon of

neglect and disregard is encapsulated in a minor incident, serving as a precursor to a more distressing sequence of events that befall Sharda. This, however, pales in comparison to the pivotal juncture when Sharda's life takes a harrowing turn when she becomes pregnant as a result of child sexual abuse at the hands of her tutor. Upon discovering her pregnancy as a consequence of manipulation by her tutor, Harpreet, Sharda's family resorts to harsh measures. In a heart-wrenching twist, Sharda becomes the recipient of physical child abuse from her own family and is eventually sent away as if she were a pariah. Durga narrates: "my father turned when Sharda fell pregnant...I never found out till they took her away" (Desai, 2010, p. 132). Notably, her family's response is rooted not in a genuine concern for her well-being, but rather in the apprehension of a breach in their societal honour. This resulting act of forcefully institutionalising Sharda serves as a measure to prevent the perceived dishonour and sustain the family's reputation. The profound constraint placed upon Sharda's autonomy directly contributes to a vulnerable state, rendering her susceptible to exploitation. This trajectory aligns with scholarly examinations of the intersections between patriarchal norms and the maltreatment of women (Agnihotri, 1996; Rosida&Rejeki, 2017).

Likewise, even the character of Durga, depicted as a young teenager, grapples with the constraining grip over her burgeoning sexuality. Her reflection that any romantic involvement would lead to dire consequences, specifically the assertion that "They would have cut her throat" underscores the stringent boundaries set upon her freedom (Desai, 2010, p. 25). This pervasive scrutiny extends to policing the girls' sexualities, thereby making them susceptible to the predatory advances of individuals like Harpreet. The familial imposition of such control additionally impedes the victims' ability to report instances of sexual violence, as these actions might tarnish the family's honour. Ultimately, the assertion of ownership and control over female sexuality stands as a pivotal factor in facilitating the perpetuation of exploitation within the depicted context. The implications of honour-bound restrictions emphasise the detrimental impact of patriarchal ideologies on women's autonomy. The intertwining of restricted sexuality with vulnerability and abuse has been underscored in the context of numerous studies (Kohli, 2017; Krishnamoorthy, 2006). The interplay between honour, control, and exploitation encapsulates the multifaceted impact of patriarchal norms on female experiences.

### **Flawed Institutions**

Within the narrative landscape of the novel, a discerning exploration emerges regarding the detrimental influence of flawed social institutions on the oppression of women. The portrayal of Sharda's admission to a mental hospital underscores a harrowing reality wherein such institutions, intended for treatment, inadvertently perpetuate her suffering. The narrator notes, "From experience I knew that even in the twenty-first century, mental health hospitals in India were still largely a dumping ground for the 'inconvenient' [women] as Harpreet called them"(Desai, 2010, p. 177). Families opt to admit these women, often at the cost of their wellbeing, to these institutions. Within these walls, they are intermingled with individuals genuinely in need of treatment. However, the depiction reveals a disconcerting reality wherein certain women are subjected to restraints, either being immobilised on cots or confined within rooms, "...simply tied to a cot or chained inside a room, because the family was too poor or too ignorant to seek proper treatment"(Desai, 2010, p. 177). Sharda is sent to one such asylum as a 16 year old child where she is tied in a room and possibly raped. This observation aligns with previous research such as Basu's (1993) examination of the gender gap in health and survival, which accentuates the vulnerability of women to inadequate healthcare provisions. Furthermore, the intricate depiction of the institutionalisation process underscores the intricate web of corruption within the police force, serving as a potent indictment of the justice system.

Moreover, Desai's discerning observations extend to the realm of legal recourse, shedding light on the absence of effective remedies for victims of pervasive issues like sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, and dowry-related deaths. In the narrative, Durga articulates that her sister-in-law, Binny, refrained from opposing the sex-detection test during her pregnancy due to the potent implications associated with challenging the prevailing norms. Durga's assertion is rooted in the understanding that the Atwal family's influential connections, coupled with their familiarity with law enforcement officials, posed significant risks to anyone who dared to voice dissent or resist these established conventions: "...for a well-connected family like the Atwals who knew the police officials intimately, it would have been very dangerous"(Desai, 2010, p. 177). The collusion between the Atwals and law enforcement, even when confronted with evidence, serves as a sobering reflection of the entrenched institutional indifference towards violence against women. Ultimately, this nuanced portrayal within the novel underscores how the absence of institutional accountability within the broader sociocultural context perpetuates the cycle of oppression



and injustice, resonating with the urgent calls for comprehensive institutional reform voiced in the existing body of literature.

### **Victim Blaming**

The novel underscores a deeply ingrained cultural phenomenon—the unsettling practice of victim blaming that frequently accompanies instances of sexual abuse against girls and women. It is a cognitive and social phenomenon characterised by the tendency to assign responsibility or fault to the victim of a negative event or harmful action, often deflecting attention away from the actual perpetrators or external circumstances. Long and Wakelin (2003) have closely associate victim's gender and sexuality with victim blaming. In the narrative, when Sharda becomes pregnant out of wedlock, the family's response is not marked by concern for her physical and emotional well-being, but rather by an inclination to question how she may have brought dishonour upon the family through her experience: "it could damage the family reputation"(Desai, 2010, p. 100). This familial response finds its extension in the treatment of her cousin, Jitu, who becomes a central figure in orchestrating the confinement of Sharda. Intriguingly, this involvement leads to the acquisition of a unique brand of sympathy from those in the family's sphere. Rather than being subjected to reproach or accountability, Jitu attracts a distinct form of empathetic consideration for the role he plays in the situation: "Funnily enough, everyone felt sorry for him about what he had to go through over Sharda"(Desai, 2010, p. 100). A parallel pattern becomes evident in the narrative when Durga becomes a survivor of rape and subsequently faces incarceration on false charges of her family's murder. During Simran's interviews, various individuals consistently express negative sentiments towards Durga, labelling her as the "snake child" and "murderer." The society's instinctive reaction is to lay blame on the victims themselves, rather than offering the necessary support.

The entrenched cultural tendency to displace culpability onto victims, rather than appropriately assigning accountability to the perpetrators, engenders a distressing cycle of continuous gendered abuse within societal contexts. This practice of victim blaming becomes a mechanism that operates to obscure the true responsibility of male perpetrators for their actions. In doing so, it inequitably transfers the principal duty of preserving honour onto women, exacerbating gender disparities and reinforcing unequal power dynamics. These interlocking dynamics culminate in the construction of an environment conducive to the perpetuation of control and exploitation by familial units, vividly illustrating the pernicious ramifications of patriarchal influences that extend to both

the individual and societal levels. The contention that the imposition of honour codes upon individuals transcends personal volition and aligns with community norms and collectively shared values within communities may be valid in this situation (Heydari et al., 2021, p. 89). However, the emphasis on the concept of values underscores the potential for tradition to be reaffirmed as a mechanism of constraint. The gendered implications of this phenomenon are significant. Victim blaming exacerbates existing gender disparities by disproportionately placing the responsibility of upholding social and familial honour upon women. This not only reinforces traditional gender roles but also underscores the lack of equitable agency within these structures. This disproportionate allocation of burden not only perpetuates an unequal power dynamic but also enforces patriarchal ideologies that subordinate women and reinforce their subservient roles within society.

### **Conclusion**

By intricately weaving a narrative that unveils intergenerational oppression within a single family, Desai offers a penetrating analysis of the cultural underpinnings that facilitate gender-based violence in contemporary India. The exploration of this pervasive violence underscores the profound influence of patriarchy, son preference, sexuality control, institutional inadequacies, and victim blaming as interconnected elements that collectively contribute to a hostile environment for women. The plot navigates the converging impact of these factors, revealing the inexorable nature of the exploitation faced by the characters Durga and Sharda. The novel acts as a poignant exposé of how patriarchal structures intricately intertwine with socio-cultural norms, effectively normalising gender disparities and justifying power imbalances. The paper delves into the insidious mechanism of sexual control, where the male figures wield dominance over women's bodies and choices. This facet of control echoes the power dynamics that reinforce the subjugation of women, allowing for the continued exploitation and child abuse faced by Durga and Sharda. The presence of institutional flaws further compounds this suffering. The inadequacies of the mental health institution that Sharda is confined to mirror the systemic apathy and lack of safeguards that enable abuse to persist unchecked. The novel underscores the dire need for comprehensive reform across cultural and institutional dimensions to safeguard women's rights and autonomy. Its portrayal of the characters' struggles resonates with wider scholarly discussions on the intricate intersection of culture, gender, and power. As the narrative unfolds, the reader is confronted with the stark realisation that true women's liberation necessitates dismantling the deeply ingrained contextual factors that foster and

sustain violence. Ultimately, *Witness the Night* advocates for a profound re-evaluation of societal norms and systems to usher in an era of genuine equality and justice for women.

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