



# Exploring the Status of Women in Shashi Deshpande and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novels

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**Abstract:** In Shashi Deshpande and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels, women characters experience a variety of problems. The lives of Indian middle-class women are depicted by both authors. The issues and tribulations of educated middle-class women are addressed by these novels. The characters serve as an illustration of how male dominance over women permeates society. Women come in a wide range of forms, sizes, and situations, but some issues impact all women in some manner. Every woman endures emotional upheavals throughout her life, regardless of her nationality or social background. In this paper, an effort has been made to focus on the emotional aspects of the problems that the protagonists of *Sister of My Heart* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *A Matter of Time* by Shashi Deshpande experience and how they are resolved. These are the main psychological, social, and cultural factors that maintain women's emotional crises. She wants to do a lot of things but is unable to do so due to life's various obligations.

The difficulties affecting modern urban middle-class women are lovingly and realistically addressed in the writings of Shashi Deshpande and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In each of the novels examined in this chapter, the special issues encountered by women who, for one reason or another, have lost the support of their husbands are covered. They prepare for the situation, and how they handle it shows how a woman's thinking is affected by her social milieu. Life isn't a bed of roses for any of them, and how they each handle difficulties shows how differently women from different generations react to having their aspirations denied.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, isolation, suppression, identity, rebellious.

In her book *A Matter of Time*, Shashi Deshpande discusses three generations of women. The first Kalyani makes concessions to a spouse who never speaks to her, in contrast to the second Sumi, who makes no effort to make amends with her estranged husband Gopal, and the third Aru, who wants to confront her father over leaving them. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*, one may observe how the two mothers deal with widowhood and forgo their own desires and aspirations in favour of their children. Anju and Sudha are more

comparable to post-feminist women who are strong and not merely influenced by emotions because they experience changes in their life as well. They draw strength from their internal resources.

The fundamental tenet of feminism is that patriarchy permeates every sphere of civilization. In all realms of culture, including the family, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic, it is dominated by men and constructed and practised in a way that prioritises men over women. As Simone de Beauvoir observed,

Since patriarchal times women have, in general, been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world about men... although women constitute numerically at least half of the human race”, and that “this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural feminine characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of education and social traditions under the purposeful control of men. (233)

Like their legendary foremothers, the female leads in *A Matter of Time* and *Sister of My Heart* are supposed to put up with the whims of their male counterparts. That could also account for Kalyani’s strong desire to be able to use kumkum and Sumi’s deception that her shattered marriage is normal. They will only be treated with respect if they obey. In *Sister of My Heart* by Divakaruni, the two mothers, Anju, and Sudha are all driven by their desire to portray the idealised picture of an Indian woman. This is done at great emotional sacrifice and at the cost of one’s happiness.

The idealised feminine values of caring, nurturing, self-denial, self-sacrifice, and tolerance are undervalued, which causes the lives of Sumi and Sudha, the major characters of *A Matter of Time* and *Sister of My Heart*, respectively, to come to an abrupt stop and leave them unable to move on. According to Deshpande, tension and unhappiness arise when reality conflicts with expectations based on aspirational ideals. Sumi, the female lead in *A Matter of Time*, is a fantastic example of the “responsibility orientation” of women’s morality. Her husband Gopal experiences some personal problems, is unable to overcome them, decides to leave the house, and casually neglects his responsibilities as a family member. He is bothered by internal issues with life and death, morality, and the meaninglessness of living, but he fails to take the family’s interests into account. Sumi chooses to fulfil her obligation to her three grown daughters despite her disbelief. She puts her pain aside and shows her daughters that she is a strong advocate for them. To the astonishment of the daughters, Sumi’s behaviour on the day her husband announces their separation is so routine that it makes it Deshpande in her book *A Matter of Time* writes, “so difficult for them to understand the enormity of what has happened” (AMT 10). They follow her example and carry on with their daily activities. They might assume that the conflict between the parents was routine because of Sumi’s composure and normalcy, which allows them to hope that “he will come back.”

Gauri Ma, Anju’s mother, in Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart*, who after her husband’s demise takes on the responsibility of Anju as well as the family of her husband’s cousin, exemplifies the first signs of this phenomenon. Sudha briefly describes herself and her characteristics. In her book *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni states:

Lines of hardship are etched around her mouth and on her forehead, for she was the one who shouldered the burden of keeping the family safe on that thunderclap day eight years ago when she received the news of our father’s death. But her eyes, dark and endless- deep- they make me think of

Kaldighi, the enormous lake behind the country mansion our family used to own before Anju and I were born. (SMH 5)

Women are emotional creatures at their core; this is a key aspect of their femininity. She struggles emotionally for a variety of reasons. Women's selflessness, together with social expectations and family obligations, are what lead to mental turmoil throughout life. In contrast to their predecessors, the heroines of Divakaruni and Deshpande undergo emotional struggle that is the subject of this article. Modern female novelists, who have more freedom to express themselves, emphasise the emotional strain that their main characters go through and try to get to a satisfying conclusion.

The emotional lives of both writers' protagonists are shown in various ways. Among other things, the fact that they are mothers, daughters, and independent people adds to the emotional tension between them. As a result, life's ups and downs have an impact on how they interact with the world. It will be clear through studying *A Matter of Time* by Shashi Deshpande and *Sister of My Heart* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni how women are now depicted differently in literature, both as authors and as characters.

In Deshpande's writings, men and women engage in side-by-side combat with the establishment as their common foe. The ladies defy social conventions associated with the home, the hearth, and the veil in order to challenge the status quo using any means they may find, or with sulking detachment. All of the female protagonists in Deshpande's books are domesticated and struggle against the dogma-filled society in order to get relief from their mental suffering. Although it can be heard in the distance, the uprising continues within the four walls of the house. Through her courageous and reforming female characters, she demonstrates the crumbling ideals and altering adjustment between tradition and modernity, between desire and decision, with the resultant psychological conflict. Her female characters are not silent; instead, they are inquisitive and unafraid of any defence.

Despite dealing with modern problems, Deshpande's women fundamentally continue to hold onto their roles as the ideal mothers and wives. The bulk of Indian women authors give their biological and social obligations the most weight and respect. They only occasionally cross all lines of humanity and even plausibility while pursuing retribution or revenge.

A crumbling marriage serves as the central theme of *A Matter of Time*. Gopal, a university professor, separates from his wife of 20 years while preserving his job and the majority of his possessions. He starts living alone and virtually monastic above the run-down printing press owned by his former pupil, making a wretched income by doing occasional copy editing for the latter. The narrative focuses more on the couple's eldest child, the lovely and reclusive Aru, who is 18 years old, and his wife, the beautiful and disengaged Sumi. Gopal is the male character in all of Deshpande's writings who is given the most sympathy, subtlety, and discussion space. Despite having previously abandoned Sumi and her family, Gopal still keeps in touch with them, which is an uncommon habit. They take an unexpectedly accommodating and generally uncritical stance, almost showing sympathy for Gopal's intellectual and spiritual challenges in light of the culture's beliefs. The father only receives occasionally strong criticism from Aru.

*A Matter of Time* profiles four generations of women, each with a distinctive outlook on life. It shows how women's perspectives are changing over time. The grandmother, Manorama, is a devout Orthodox woman who hopes that her daughter Kalyani's husband will visit the family again, even if only as a present. The fact that Kalyani would be able to wear the "kumkum," a sign of respectability that married women value, makes her consent to his reintegration into the family as well. Living as an alienated wife is less difficult for her than living as a separated wife. But when Kalyani's daughter and son-in-law, Sumi and Gopal, encounter a replay of past events, she decides not to press her husband to make a compromise. Her oldest child, Aru, is ready to file a lawsuit against her father for leaving the family. The younger generation reacts to life's upheavals more forcefully, which is a reflection of how people are reacting to life's changes in general.

The anxiety that women who have been abandoned already experience is exacerbated by the burden of being a mother. It's not simple for a woman to raise a child or a child on her alone. In *A Matter of Time*, Kalyani and Sumi are under stress since they have to take care of their daughters. These women's refusal to give in and acceptance of accountability for their own acts is a test of their fortitude and a testament to their capabilities. Kalyani boldly assumes the duty of rearing her children Sumi and Premi in spite of the loss of her son and Shripati's isolation. Due to the fact that her daughter Sumi is going through a similar stage in life, she is much more affected by her husband's silence. Sumi, who is also divorced from her husband, has more work to do since she worries that any emotional outburst will negatively affect her daughters, who are still developing. Therefore, she needs to maintain her composure outside. Deshpande writes, "She shows no outward sign of distress, but the girls notice a new habit in her, of touching them, holding their hands, smoothing their hair, as if this physical contact is a manifestation of some intense emotion within her."(33)

Due to psychological problems that affect their mental health, Kalyani, Sumi, and Aru all face emotional anguish, but it is their acceptance of their situation and stoicism that allow these characters to traverse their emotionally disturbed lives. Deshpande's portrayal of a large family includes two or three generations living together. Deshpande has researched how women's attitudes are changing and how they turn to their families for support. Her young heroes revolt against traditional norms and gender roles. The gendered roles that are ascribed to men and women prevent them from reaching their full potential as individuals, according to Jaya, Sarita, and Sumi. They struggle with escaping the restricting roles. They challenge, reject, and aspire to be freed from social norms and ways of life. Shashi Deshpande's depictions of women from different generations show both the traditional and modern worlds of women.

In the web of family history, an accident results in the deaths of Sumi and Shripati. They can't figure out their problem. The "Big House" watches as yet another generation battles against an unforgiving fate and is recorded in history. The rebellious daughter of Sumi, Aru, won't take no for an answer. She visits her father Gopal with the intention of disclosing her father's unusual behaviour rather than expecting him to feel sorry for her. The most notable instance of this is Kalyani, who stays silent to her husband Shripati for almost 40 years. The main cause of women's emotional distress is silence. Shashi Deshpande writes:

...is that what has helped Kalyani to endure everything, the fact that she is a wife and not a widow? The fact that she has the right to all the privileges of the wife of a loving husband? Sumi remembers the tray of kumkum, paan-supari, and coconut Manju brought her, she thinks of the old woman's words, 'What is a woman without her husband?' (167)

The protagonists of Deshpande's work, especially Urmi and Sumi, return to the commonplace and reassuring texture of daily life as a natural and necessary process. At this point, Shashi Deshpande's feminist side enters and depicts the woman as she perceives her. She makes her protesting and rebellious side more apparent. These are the central figures who deliberately choose to oppose power, which eventually leads to emotional instability in their life. In Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart*, Anju, Sudha, and Pishi's mothers all live in the same house. Raising two girls is a challenging endeavour. Unlike Sudha's mother Nalini, a conventional woman who wanders through life, Anju's mother does not let circumstances intimidate her. She oversees the bookstore and attempts to provide the two girls, who were born after their fathers left the home, with the best upbringing possible. Despite her poor condition, she continues to give the daughters everything. She wants them resolved before she goes before she dies. Contrary to the majority of society, she accepts things as they are and does not pass judgement on the two kids for being born on the day their fathers died. Although having children is difficult, it is also rewarding. Sudha leaves her in-laws' home after being persuaded by her mother-in-law to abort the female foetus. For her child, she is willing to put herself through any level of emotional hardship because motherhood makes up for all of life's disappointments. In her book *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni states:

I felt motherhood was my final chance at happiness. Perhaps I believed it would give me back what wifehood had taken away. Or perhaps it is just that desire lies at the heart of human existence. When we turn away from one desire, we must find another to cleave to with all our strength-or else we die. (SMH 183)

*Sister of My Heart* is written in a realistic way and examines the complicated relationships within a Bengali family, in contrast to the magic realism she used in her previous work. They were both born in the vast old Calcutta mansion on the tragic night when both of their fathers mysteriously disappeared. Sudha and Anju, who are distant cousins, were nurtured together. They share clothes, worries, and dreams and are more closely related than sisters. The fortunes of the Chatterjee family are at an all-time low because only widows—the mothers of the daughters and their aunt—remain at home. The book's forty-two chapters are structured as an extended, intricate debate.

The emotional stress that love causes in women's life is enormous. In *Sister of My Heart*, Sudha and Ashok engage in a strange kind of courtship, and Sudha says she would marry him if she could. Due to social pressures and her loyalty to her mother, she nevertheless rejects the attractions of love. She marries Ramesh, a nice man from her caste and upbringing, and deftly navigates the challenges that come up afterward. Despite being unhappy with her circumstances, Sudha refrains from acting in a radical way out of concern for her family. Because doing so would endanger Anju's marriage, she doesn't leave her house and come back.

Sudha encounters issues with love at every turn. When she falls in love while she's in school, she loses her freedom. She is not allowed to leave the house, not even for school. She also thinks that if Ashok loves her, he will

propose to her when she is old enough to get married. Sudha's stubbornness is difficult for Anju to comprehend. When it comes to defying her mother's desires, Sudha, who is deeply in love with Ashok, has an "unfocused expression in her eyes." Sudha draws a comparison between her reality and the fantasies from which she is saved from monsters by the prince. "when in some place impervious to logic, she turned Ashok into the prince who has to save her from the clutches of the wicked king." (100)

She has a very difficult attitude to understand. She wants to spend her life with Ashok, but because she doesn't have a father, she can't afford to defy her mother and make the bold decision to get married. Sudha experiences a lot of emotional distress as a result of this. She is limited by her psychology as well as the Sita Savitri syndrome, which instills in her the idea that opposing her mother's wishes and upsetting her is undesirable.

Nalini Ma, Sudha's mother, realises it is too late and that she should write to Ashok when she actually finds a respectable partner within their caste. They even talk about eloping, but she rejects the idea after realising how it would interfere with Anju and Sunil's newly scheduled wedding. Sunil's father would never allow his son to marry a woman whose cousin had left the family to go out with a man she met at the theatre.

The Divakaruni heroines also have emotional boundaries because they are unable to articulate their emotions. Sudha adopts an odd quiet about her mother-in-law's of her, especially after her marriage. The central figures in both Deshpande and Divakaruni become even more silent after getting hitched. By reconciling the Westernized notions influencing their generation with the traditional Indian value systems and wishes of their mothers, young women learn to bargain with their partners. Anju travels to America with her husband and grows stronger and more independent as she goes through the acculturation process, unlike Sudha, whose marriage is unpleasant, who stays in India but leaves her husband to raise her child alone, incurring cultural criticism. Acculturation has an emotional and psychological effect on a woman in addition to helping her become more autonomous and self-reliant. Due to their position in the adopted country, the protagonists of Divakaruni encounter emotional limitations. Her characters serve as an example of this, as they go through an emotional breakdown while achieving self-determination.

The female leads in Shashi Deshpande's and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's films both have emotional constraints. In patriarchy, men typically embrace the dominant style while women do the opposite. The two main protagonists decide to remain silent about their situations. Division results from Divakaruni's situation's calm. The characters' hushed demeanour has a negative connotation in Shashi Deshpande's books. It stands for passivity, fear, inaction, and escape. Sumi yields and loses herself as a result of the calm. The protagonist of Divakaruni, Sudha, should have spoken up and asserted herself at those times, but instead she keeps quiet and makes compromise after compromise. Deshpande and Divakaruni both get comfort from turning to time-tested strategies. They look within for answers rather than resorting to drastic ways to escape.

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