

## Gender Bias and Emotional Alienation in Mother-Daughter Relationships in Shashi Deshpande's Novels

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### **Abstract**

*The representation of mother-daughter relationships in Indian English literature often reveals the complex intersections of gender, identity, and emotional experience. Shashi Deshpande's novels provide a powerful exploration of these dynamics, particularly through the lens of gender bias and emotional alienation. This paper examines how patriarchal structures influence maternal behaviour, leading to strained relationships between mothers and daughters. Through a close reading of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *Roots and Shadows*, the study highlights how daughters experience neglect, rejection, and psychological conflict, which in turn shape their quest for identity and selfhood. The mother figure, rather than being a source of nurturing, often becomes an agent of internalised patriarchy. The paper argues that emotional alienation within these relationships is not merely personal but deeply rooted in societal expectations. Ultimately, Deshpande presents the mother-daughter bond as a site of tension, resistance, and eventual self-realisation.*

### **Keywords**

*Gender Bias, Emotional Alienation, Mother-Daughter Relationship, Patriarchy, Feminism, Identity Crisis, Psychological Conflict, Shashi Deshpande*

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The exploration of familial relationships in Indian English literature often serves as a lens through which broader social and cultural structures can be examined. Among these relationships, the bond between mother and daughter occupies a particularly significant space, as it reflects the transmission of values, expectations, and emotional experiences across generations. In the novels of Shashi Deshpande, this relationship is portrayed with remarkable depth and complexity, revealing the underlying tensions created by gender bias and emotional alienation. Rather than idealising motherhood as a nurturing and harmonious bond, Deshpande presents it as a site of conflict, shaped by the pervasive influence of patriarchy and societal expectations. As critics often note, "*the family becomes the first site where gender discrimination is both learned and internalised.*"

In traditional Indian society, the role of the mother is often associated with sacrifice, care, and unconditional love. However, Deshpande challenges this idealised image by presenting mothers who are themselves products of a patriarchal system that privileges male children over female ones. As a result, the mother-daughter relationship becomes fraught with tension, as daughters are made to feel inferior, unwanted, or burdensome. This dynamic is evident in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, where the protagonist, Saru, experiences a profound sense of rejection from her mother. Her mother's preference for her son is not subtle but explicitly expressed, creating a deep emotional divide between mother and daughter. Saru recalls, "*A kind of shame that engulfed me, making me want to rage,*" capturing the intensity of her emotional turmoil.

The concept of internalised patriarchy plays a significant role in shaping maternal attitudes toward daughters. Mothers, who have navigated a system that prioritises male authority, often adopt its values as a means of survival. This internalisation manifests in their treatment of daughters, where adherence to societal norms is emphasised over individual expression. The daughter, therefore, becomes a site where these values are reinforced, sometimes at the cost of emotional well-being. The mother's actions, though seemingly harsh, are often rooted in a belief that conformity ensures security. However, this approach inadvertently perpetuates inequality, as daughters are denied the opportunity to explore their identities freely. The resulting tension reflects a deeper systemic issue, where individuals become agents of the very structures that constrain them.

Emotional alienation within the family unit is often compounded by the presence of comparison, particularly between siblings. The preferential treatment of male children creates a hierarchy that is both explicit and implicit. Daughters, positioned lower within this hierarchy, are made to feel less significant, leading to a diminished sense of self-worth. This comparison is not always verbalised but is conveyed through actions, attention, and expectations. The cumulative effect of such experiences fosters

resentment and insecurity, as daughters struggle to reconcile their desire for approval with the reality of neglect. These dynamic underscores the role of familial structures in reinforcing broader societal inequalities.

The presence of gender bias within the family structure plays a crucial role in shaping the psychological experiences of daughters. In many instances, the mother becomes the enforcer of patriarchal values, perpetuating the very system that oppresses her. This internalisation of patriarchal norms leads to a paradoxical situation where women, instead of supporting one another, become agents of discrimination. Saru's mother, for example, treats her daughter as a lesser being, reinforcing the idea that a girl child is a liability. The statement, "*If you are a woman, I don't want to be one,*" reflects Saru's deep-seated resentment and her rejection of the identity imposed upon her.

Emotional alienation emerges as a direct consequence of this gender bias. The lack of affection, understanding, and communication between mother and daughter creates a sense of isolation that profoundly affects the daughter's sense of self. Saru's experiences illustrate how emotional neglect can lead to a fractured identity, as she struggles to reconcile her desire for maternal love with the reality of rejection. As one critic observes, "*emotional deprivation within the family often results in a lifelong search for validation and belonging.*" The absence of emotional support not only impacts her childhood but continues to influence her relationships and decisions in adulthood. This enduring impact highlights the long-term consequences of emotional alienation within familial relationships.

Deshpande's portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship also emphasises the role of silence as a form of communication. In many cases, the lack of open dialogue between mothers and daughters exacerbates their emotional distance. The inability to express feelings, confront conflicts, or seek understanding creates an environment where misunderstandings and resentment flourish.

The emotional distance between mothers and daughters is often reinforced by unspoken expectations. These expectations, though rarely articulated, dictate behaviour and limit communication. The daughter's inability to meet these expectations results in disappointment, further widening the emotional gap. These dynamic underscores the importance of open dialogue in fostering understanding.

In *Roots and Shadows*, Deshpande further explores the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship through the character of Indu. Unlike Saru, Indu's conflict is not solely rooted in direct rejection but in a broader sense of emotional deprivation and lack of belonging. Raised in a traditional joint family, Indu feels suffocated by the rigid structures and expectations imposed upon her. Her longing for love and acceptance is evident in her assertion, "*I want to be loved, I want to be happy,*" a simple yet powerful expression of her unmet emotional needs.

The theme of rebellion is closely linked to the experience of emotional alienation in Deshpande's novels. Both Saru and Indu respond to their strained relationships with their mothers by asserting their independence, often in ways that challenge societal norms. These acts of defiance represent a struggle for selfhood and autonomy. However, as often argued, "*rebellion in women's writing is not merely resistance but a search for identity,*" highlighting the deeper purpose behind their actions.

The portrayal of mothers in Deshpande's novels is nuanced and complex, avoiding simplistic judgments or stereotypes. While the mothers are often depicted as harsh or unloving, they are also shown to be shaped by their own experiences and limitations. This complexity allows for a more empathetic understanding of their actions, even as their impact on their daughters remains deeply problematic. The mother figure thus becomes both a victim and an enforcer of patriarchy, embodying the contradictions inherent in the system. The concept of home, which is traditionally associated with comfort and security, is redefined in Deshpande's novels as a space of conflict and emotional struggle. For Saru and Indu, the home is not a place of refuge but a site of tension, where their identities are constantly challenged and undermined.

Another dimension worth examining is the role of societal perception in shaping maternal behaviour. Mothers are often judged based on their ability to raise "ideal" daughters who conform to social expectations. This external pressure influences their interactions, as they prioritise societal approval over emotional connection. Consequently, the daughter's individuality is suppressed, as deviation from norms is perceived as a reflection of maternal failure.

Despite the pervasive sense of alienation, Deshpande's novels also offer a path toward self-realisation and healing. Both Saru and Indu eventually come to terms with their past and begin to assert their identities in more meaningful ways. This process of self-discovery involves confronting their emotions, understanding their relationships, and redefining their sense of self. The idea that "you are your own refuge" encapsulates this journey, suggesting that true fulfilment lies in self-acceptance and independence. The intersection of gender bias and emotional alienation in the mother-daughter relationship thus becomes a powerful framework for understanding the broader themes of Deshpande's work. Through her nuanced portrayal of these dynamics, she highlights the impact of societal structures on individual experiences, while also emphasising the possibility of resistance and transformation. Her novels challenge readers to reconsider traditional notions of family, motherhood, and identity, offering a more complex and realistic depiction of these relationships.

The psychological depth of Deshpande's characters further enhances the exploration of emotional alienation. The inner conflicts faced by Saru and Indu reveal

the profound impact of maternal rejection on their self-perception. Their struggles are not limited to external circumstances but are deeply rooted in their internal worlds, where feelings of inadequacy and insecurity persist. This psychological dimension adds a layer of complexity to the narrative, emphasising that the consequences of gender bias extend beyond visible actions into the realm of emotional and mental well-being.

Another important aspect of Deshpande's work is the critique of societal norms that dictate the behaviour of women. The expectation that women must conform to certain roles, such as being obedient daughters or dutiful wives, restricts their ability to express their individuality. This restriction is often reinforced by mothers, who, having internalised these norms, pass them on to their daughters. The resulting conflict highlights the cyclical nature of patriarchy, where each generation perpetuates the same patterns of behaviour.

The depiction of communication breakdown in mother-daughter relationships also serves as a significant theme in Deshpande's novels. The inability to engage in open and honest dialogue creates a barrier that prevents understanding and reconciliation. This breakdown is often characterised by unspoken emotions and unresolved tensions, which continue to influence the characters' lives. The absence of communication thus becomes both a symptom and a cause of emotional alienation.

The exploration of identity in Deshpande's novels is closely tied to the mother-daughter relationship. The daughters' sense of self is shaped by their interactions with their mothers, as well as their attempts to distance themselves from these influences. This process of identity formation involves both rejection and acceptance, as the characters navigate the complexities of their relationships and their own desires. The tension between conformity and individuality becomes a central aspect of their journey. The influence of education and exposure to alternative perspectives often empowers daughters to question traditional norms. Through this process, they gain the confidence to assert their identities, challenging the limitations imposed upon them. This shift represents a broader societal transformation toward greater gender equality.

The emotional alienation depicted in Deshpande's novels is not merely a result of overt discrimination but is often reinforced through subtle everyday interactions. Small gestures, silences, and unspoken preferences contribute to a cumulative sense of neglect experienced by daughters. These seemingly minor acts gradually shape the daughter's perception of herself as less valued, leading to internalised feelings of inadequacy. The normalisation of such behaviour within the family structure makes it difficult to challenge, thereby perpetuating emotional distance across generations.

The figure of the mother in Deshpande's fiction is particularly significant because she embodies both authority and vulnerability. While she exercises control within the domestic space, her own life is constrained by societal expectations and limitations. This dual position creates a complex dynamic in which the mother's actions are both oppressive and conditioned by her circumstances. Understanding this duality is essential to interpreting the mother-daughter relationship, as it reveals that the conflict is not solely personal but deeply rooted in structural inequalities.

Another crucial dimension of the relationship is the role of comparison and favouritism within the family. The preference for male children not only elevates the status of sons but simultaneously diminishes the worth of daughters. This comparison creates a competitive environment where daughters feel compelled to prove their value, often without receiving recognition or validation. The emotional consequences of such favouritism are profound, as they affect the daughter's confidence and sense of belonging. Deshpande also explores the impact of societal expectations on the emotional lives of women. Mothers, having internalised these expectations, often impose them on their daughters, believing that conformity is necessary for survival. This transmission of values, however, is not always accepted by the daughters, who increasingly question and resist these norms. The resulting tension reflects a generational shift in attitudes toward gender roles and highlights the evolving nature of female identity in contemporary society.

The theme of guilt emerges as a significant element in the mother-daughter relationship. Daughters who attempt to assert their independence often experience guilt for defying their mothers' expectations. This guilt is intensified by cultural narratives that emphasise filial duty and respect for elders. As a result, the daughters' pursuit of autonomy becomes a source of internal conflict, as they struggle to balance their personal desires with their sense of obligation. The portrayal of emotional alienation in Deshpande's novels also extends to the daughters' relationships with others. The lack of maternal affection influences their ability to form healthy emotional connections, often leading to insecurity and mistrust. This pattern suggests that the mother-daughter relationship plays a foundational role in shaping the individual's emotional development. The absence of a supportive maternal bond thus has far-reaching implications beyond the immediate family. The exploration of emotional resilience reveals how daughters navigate the challenges of alienation. Despite adversity, many develop coping mechanisms that enable them to pursue their goals. This resilience reflects their capacity to transform negative experiences into sources of strength.

Deshpande's narrative technique further enhances the exploration of these themes by providing insight into the inner thoughts and emotions of her characters.

The use of introspection allows readers to understand the depth of the daughters' struggles and the complexity of their relationships with their mothers. This focus on internal experience underscores the psychological realism of her work and highlights the importance of emotional context in understanding human behaviour. The conflict between tradition and modernity is another significant factor influencing the mother-daughter relationship. While mothers often represent traditional values, daughters are increasingly influenced by modern ideas of independence and self-expression. This clash of perspectives creates a gap that is difficult to bridge, as both parties struggle to understand each other's viewpoints. The resulting tension reflects broader societal changes and the challenges of adapting to new cultural norms.

Another significant dimension that shapes the mother-daughter relationship is the role of cultural narratives surrounding ideal womanhood. These narratives, often perpetuated through tradition, literature, and social practices, construct a rigid framework within which women are expected to operate. Mothers, as carriers of these narratives, play a crucial role in transmitting them to their daughters, consciously or unconsciously reinforcing standards of behaviour that prioritise obedience, modesty, and self-sacrifice. This transmission is not merely instructional but deeply performative, as daughters observe and internalise their mothers' actions as models of acceptable conduct. However, the changing socio-cultural landscape has introduced alternative narratives that challenge these traditional ideals, creating a conflict between inherited values and emerging perspectives. Daughters exposed to education, media, and broader social interactions begin to question the limitations imposed upon them, leading to a gradual shift in consciousness. This shift often results in tension within the familial space, as mothers may perceive such questioning as a rejection of cultural values rather than an assertion of individuality. The resulting conflict is not simply generational but ideological, reflecting a broader transformation in societal attitudes toward gender roles. The daughter's resistance, therefore, becomes a site of negotiation, where traditional expectations are re-evaluated and redefined. This process is neither linear nor uniform, as it involves moments of doubt, compromise, and reaffirmation. The coexistence of multiple narratives within the same household highlights the transitional nature of contemporary society, where old and new values intersect and often collide. The mother-daughter relationship thus becomes a critical space for examining how cultural change is experienced at a personal level, revealing the complexities of navigating identity within a shifting social framework.

The tension between acceptance and resistance defines the trajectory of the daughter's journey. While she seeks approval, she also recognises the need to assert her independence. This duality reflects the complexity of human relationships,

where conflicting emotions coexist. The role of narrative perspective in depicting mother-daughter relationships enhances the emotional depth of the analysis. By focusing on the daughter's internal experiences, the narrative captures the complexity of her struggles, providing insight into the psychological impact of alienation.

Deshpande also addresses the issue of identity formation in the context of emotional alienation. The daughters' efforts to define themselves are shaped by their experiences of rejection and conflict. In many cases, they construct their identities in opposition to their mothers, seeking to distance themselves from the traits and values they associate with maternal authority. This process of differentiation is essential for self-realisation but is often accompanied by emotional turmoil. The notion of reconciliation, although not always fully realised, remains an important aspect of Deshpande's exploration of mother-daughter relationships. Moments of understanding and empathy, however fleeting, suggest the possibility of bridging the emotional gap between generations. These moments highlight the potential for change and the importance of communication in overcoming alienation. While complete resolution may not be achieved, the acknowledgement of shared experiences provides a foundation for healing.

Finally, the enduring relevance of Deshpande's portrayal of mother-daughter relationships lies in its ability to resonate with contemporary readers. The themes of gender bias, emotional alienation, and the search for identity continue to be pertinent in modern society, where traditional norms coexist with evolving perspectives. Her work invites readers to reflect on their own experiences and to consider the ways in which relationships can be redefined to foster understanding and mutual respect. Through this exploration, Deshpande not only highlights the challenges of the mother-daughter bond but also suggests the possibility of transformation and growth.

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