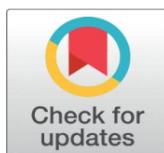
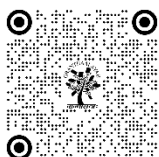


QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND FEMININE SENSIBILITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S STRANGERS TO OURSELVES

Dr. B. Krishnaiah ¹

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Humanities, University of Hyderabad, Gachibowli, Hyderabad – 500046, Telangana, India



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ABSTRACT

In Shashi Deshpande's work, the search for identity is a recurring theme that shows the conflict between social roles and personal affirmation. The study is part of a larger discussion about women's writing in India that questions gender, silence, and societal norms by focusing on this novel. This analysis goes beyond just gender politics to look at the mental and social aspects of identity development as well. This gives us a more complete picture of the internal and external forces that affect women's lives. The junction of tradition, modernity, and feminist consciousness is the most important thing to understand about the protagonist's mental state and, by extension, the mental state of the modern Indian woman who is dealing with contradictory demands. Also, the study recognizes how important it is to look at identity not as something that stays the same, but as something that changes over time through constant personal and social negotiation. This study combines feminist literary criticism with social and cultural factors to give a full picture of what it means to be a woman in *Strangers to Ourselves*.

Keywords: Women's Identity, Feminine Sensibility, Reaction to Cultural Limitations, Existentialism, Social and Political Aspects of Women Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande is one of the important writers in Indian English literature. She was conferred many awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1990, the Padma Shri in 2009 and The Hindu Literary Prize in 2014 for her contribution to women literature. Her work critically explores issues of identity, gender roles, and personal freedom, showing how complicated the lives of middle-class women are in modern India. Deshpande's writing not only shows how patriarchal systems create long-lasting social and cultural problems, but it also shows how her characters slowly become more conscious of themselves and their feminine sensibility. Because of her attention on the complex interior lives of women dealing with family and social expectations, several scholars have praised her work as an important part of feminist literary discourse in India. Her book *Strangers to Ourselves* tells a story that makes you think about the complexities of identification and the emotional conflicts that women face in modern Indian society. The novel begins with the lines that threaten to throw things off to reach out to the space where their identity is preserved: "There are two passions that govern human life: one is the desire for progeny, the other for a place of one's own. We live our lives in pursuit of these goals, we measure our lives by our success in achieving them." (1)

The present study seeks to investigate how *Strangers to Ourselves* deals with the search for identity and the expression of feminine sensibility. Set in metropolitan India, this novel is a contemplative narrative that lets us look at

the modern woman's fight for independence and identity. The study uses an approach that is based on feminist critical theory and involves a close reading of literature. The method is complex and includes closely reading the text to break down the themes, character development, and narrative strategies that all work together to show the main characters' search for identity. The feminist critical approach focuses on how identity is shaped by gender, and it shows how patriarchal norms and cultural expectations are shown and resisted in the novel. Commenting upon Shashi Deshpande's work, Viney Kirpal said that "Deshpande's texts provide the most detailed and competent record of gender injustice in contemporary India" (363). The study also looks closely at narrative tools like silence, internal monologue, and psychological realism, which are used to express the feminine sensibility. Speaking about women writers, Shashi Deshpande says:

All this kind of writing – feminist, humorous, pornographic – as its place in woman writing, as it has in the writing of men. For women, particularly, after so many years of silence, there is bound to be some exaggeration, some extravagance...Women have every right to express themselves any way they want to. What matters in their writing, as in the writing of men, is sincerity, integrity and professionalism. (1998, 231)

2. THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN INDIA

Indian women are born into a society that is heavily influenced by patriarchal norms that dictate how men and women should act and what responsibilities they should play. In the past, the Indian social and cultural structure has kept men in charge, with their control extending to all areas of life, including family, public, and social life. As a result, women's identities have been mostly shaped and limited by what society expects of them in their duties as wives and mothers, as well as by their place in the hierarchy of marriage. This system sets up a set of rules that not only tells women what their duties are as daughters, wives, and mothers, but also quietly stifles their own goals and voices. The male-dominated cultural order has an effect on many things, including family structure, social standards, and even the law. This keeps gender domination going. These patriarchal rules create a kind of psychological and social silence, where the female self is often pushed to the side or made invisible in the bigger social story. Her novels often show how women fight against these long-lasting hegemonies and how they deal with the internal difficulties and compromises that come with living up to societal expectations. The man and woman relationships are also her primary concern in her work. She dealt with strained human relationships between husband and wife and their dilemmas, conflicts and reconciliations. Speaking to Geetha Gangadharan, Deshpande explains that "Human relationship is what a writer is involved. Person to person and person to society relationship-these are two primary concerns of a creative writer, and to me, the former is of immense importance. My preoccupation is with interpersonal relationships and human emotions. (II)

As India's economy and society change, especially in cities and among the middle class, the way women develop their identities has also changed. Modernity, education, and feminist ideas have started to question conventional roles, which is slowly changing how Indian women see themselves and how society sees them. This change is full of contradictions, as middle-class women have to deal with the conflicts between cultural standards that have been passed down to them and new desires for independence and self-expression. A lot of the time, literature shows a woman stuck in the middle of ancient and new paradigms, representing the struggle between cultural loyalty and personal freedom. Deshpande's stories present these problems by showing how her female protagonists try to balance their family and social identities with their own ambitions for selfhood. Gayatri Spivak aptly writes in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She underlines:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation the figure of woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'Third World Woman' caught between tradition and modernization. (Spivak, 1988)

The tension is made worse by the fact that patriarchal norms still exist alongside current feminist ideals, which can make women feel anxious and unsure of themselves. The book *Strangers to Ourselves* shows how the identity of an Indian middle-class woman changes with time, focusing on the emotional and social pressures that come with these changes.

3. FEMININE SENSIBILITY AS A REACTION TO CULTURAL LIMITATIONS

Feminine sensibility in literature comes from India's historical and social-cultural background. It shows a statement of self-awareness and psychological depth that goes against traditional patriarchal ideas. Indian feminist writing talks about feminine sensibility, which is being very aware of the emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of women's lives. Feminism is social and political movement that emerged for the emancipation of women defending their equality in political, economic and social spheres. It attempts to overhaul the institutionalized structure of the patriarchal society and identify their rights, claims and achievements. Many a writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Oliver Schreiner, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir dealt with feminist concerns greatly. Beauvoir categorically said in *The Second Sex* that the male chauvinistic culture considers women as the 'other' and this notion of the patriarchy is responsible for the gender bias towards women.

Shashi Deshpande's novels show this sensitivity as a complicated reaction to the cultural ambiguity that women face, where they have to deal with oppression and empowerment, silence and expression at the same time. The main characters' journeys show a continuing process of self-affirmation in which feminine subjectivity is freed from the limits of traditional roles. Commenting on the feminism of Deshpande, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan observes that "In Deshpande's novel this tension leads to a focus on "women's issues"—implicitly regarded as common to all women—even as the writer's consciousness about women's oppression is attributed to promptings from western feminism." (77)

This process frequently means facing the limits you have put on yourself and finding a complex feminine voice that won't be erased or simplified. The rise of feminine sensibility in Indian women's writing is part of a larger cultural conversation about identity, voice, and agency. It shows the hidden conflicts and possibilities that exist within Indian womanhood. Deshpande's work, like *Strangers to Ourselves*, fits into this transformative conversation by showing the psychological and emotional reality of middle-class Indian women.

4. PEOPLE WE DO NOT KNOW

The majority of *Strangers to Ourselves* is situated in Mumbai, a big city that serves as a symbolic setting for analyzing modern identities and personal issues. Aparna, the main character in the novel has to deal with the problems that come up between her inner world and her relationships with other people. The novel evolves through a deep look at the character's thoughts, feelings, and problems, with a focus on her marriage and her feelings of being alone inside herself. It talks about Aparna's path toward self-awareness and emotional healing, showing how desires, fears, and societal expectations can work together in small ways. "Falling in love has had no place in Aparna's plans for her life. That is over for her, she has done it once, she has been signed and burnt." (2) The novel's metropolitan setting is important because it demonstrates how tradition and modernity come together, where ancient cultural standards come up against new ideological challenges. The emotional landscape is really well done, and it shows themes of love, separation, self-reflection, and strength in the face of a quickly changing Indian society. The plot of the book is not straight, but it is reflective, and it makes readers think about their own identities in a way that is relevant to women in modern India.

The main idea of *Strangers to Ourselves* is the search for identity and the quest for self-discovery. The main character's emotional and mental problems show up as an existential question about who she is outside of the roles she plays in life. This internal battle is made worse by the realities of marriage, where emotional distance and unsaid tensions make intimacy and independence even harder to understand. Feminine sensibility is an important part of this theme since the book explores the main character's complex emotional world, which is full of fragility, strength, paradoxes, and reconciliations. The way that voices and silences are shown, both literally and figuratively, shows how the women felt repressed and free to express themselves in their homes and in society. Deshpande looks at the hidden but strong emotional tensions that define women's identities through these themes. She shows how personal and relationship dynamics affect selfhood in complicated ways and how one "haunted by sense of loss, though we don't know what it is we had. And yet we are for ever held in thrall by a yearning for a place to belong to, a place we can call our own." (1)

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Deshpande uses a thoughtful writing style that focuses on the protagonist's inner existence and how real and deep it is. Readers may really feel what the character is going through and how they feel about things by using introspective narration and being very aware of their own thoughts and feelings. The themes of silence and speech come up a lot in the book, representing both suppression and the chance to affirm oneself and the responsibilities both at work place and at home. For instance, Aparna remembers her mother's hard work:

How hard she worked, both in the bank and at home. Waking early to make breakfast, the lunch boxes for herself, and for Aparna (Baba, if she gave him lunch, forgotten to eat it, brought the box back with the food uneaten, or often didn't bring it back at all), getting Aparna ready, plating her long hair, making sure that her school uniform had been ironed the previous night, leaving home after breakfast, with Aparna riding pillion on her scooter, so that she could drop her at school. Shopping on the way back in the evening, tidying, the house, preparing the evening meal. (58)

Deshpande uses these kinds of storytelling style to make the mental and emotional problems of women who are trying to find their identity and power in a patriarchal society more visible. The writing is subtle and emotionally compelling, avoiding overt dramatization in favor of modest but dramatic insights. This way of telling the story fits with a feminist literary culture that prioritizes showing women's inner lives in real and complicated ways.

5. THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY: MENTAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS

The main character in *Strangers to Ourselves* is always at odds with herself as she tries to balance her own identity with the roles that society and her family want her to play. This struggle is marked by bewilderment, feeling alone, and constantly questioning oneself, which shows the psychological turmoil that comes with forming an identity in a patriarchal society. The book meticulously shows how silence can be both a sign of repression and a place for self-reflection, where the main character deals with her broken identity and hidden desires. The process of self-reflection brings forth the complexity of women's subjectivity by showing the conflicts between what society expects and what is true to oneself. This internal conversation is not just psychological; it is also cultural, as the main character deals with the many demands of gender, tradition, and modernity. The book makes a point of how hard it is to make sense of a self that is always being negotiated between internal desires and exterior facts. In the context of Aparna living in a hired house, she feels like isolated as she "has a pang, wondering whether all her life she will live like this, in homes that belong to others, among the possession of strangers." (33)

The protagonist's experiences in marriage and family life, which are typical places for women to find their identity in Indian society, play a big role in how the novel's characters construct their identities. The story shows how the main character's sense of uniqueness often clashes with her marriage roles and expectations as she struggles to find her own space within the limits of marriage. Family life is a place where the main character can assert her independence against patriarchal institutions. The relationship between spouses is shown to be both a source of restriction and a spur for personal progress, showing how closeness and individuality can work together. This nuanced view goes against simple ideas of oppression vs freedom and instead shows marriage and family life as complicated places where identity is constantly constructed through negotiation, struggle, and compromise. Aparna, after the breakup of her marriage and death of her father, she happens meet Hari, a musician. "She senses something in him, which makes him different from all the other men she has known – an intensity of feeling. She has glimpsed, even in their short time together, that music is not just a profession for him, it's a passion that lights up his entire life; obviously, she thinks, he will bring the same passion into a relationship." (44)

A major part of Aparna's search for identity is the conflict between wanting to follow cultural traditions and wanting to be independent. This is similar to what the Indian middle class goes through. The novel focuses on how cultural identity, which is established by family and community values, often clashes with new ideas about selfhood that are centered on individualism and self-expression. This intersectionality makes the character's development more complicated as she tries to balance keeping her culture alive with accepting change. The Indian middle-class way of life, which stresses family honor and fitting in with society, makes it very hard for women to be themselves. Therefore, as the days pass on, she doesn't know how she establishes her human relationships with her patient Jyothi, speaks with her so intimately, surprises her. Shashi Deshpande writes:

She has surprised that she has gone this far with Jyothi. How did it happen? She does not realize, or if she does, she puts the thought away, that by letting emotions, which she had been so wary of, take her over, she has become open to other people's feelings and emotions. The distance she has maintained between herself and others since her father's death, since her divorce, seems to have dissolved." (75)

6. FEMININE SENSIBILITY IN STRANGERS TO OURSELVES

The novel portrays a deep picture of complicated women's emotions showcase vulnerable as well as strong, and the internal conflicts that make up feminine sensibility connected. Deshpande deals with complicated women's lives by giving many details about Aparna's mental state. This emotional depth comes from a careful look at how women deal with conflicting wants, concerns, and social pressures, which shows a sensitivity that is both strong and weak. The plot becomes more real and believable when it presents women as dependent and independent at times, as well as silent and vocal. Here, feminine sensibility goes beyond just being emotional; it includes a deep understanding of social situations, personal history, and internal conflicts that shape who we are.

A key part of feminine sensibility in the novel is the assertion of women's voices and power in a world where they are forced to be silent and invisible. The main character's story is about getting her voice back and expressing her wants and needs that have been ignored or silenced in the past. This process of breaking the silence is not only speaking up; it is a deep assertion of one's identity that challenges the prevailing power structures that try to keep women in subservient roles. The novel dramatizes the feminist need to go beyond silence to a place where women can be themselves and act without fear or apologies. This way of expressing feminine voice is important for breaking down patriarchal standards and opening up new ways for women to be themselves. Describing the vulnerable lives of women, the author presents the two different life backgrounds of the characters – Jyothi, and Aparna, who were subject to gender bias:

And Jyothi says *I was an unloved child*. 'My father didn't even look at me, his focus was Dada, the Son of the family, the Heir. And for my mother, Dada was the love of her life, she had no eyes for anyone else...

'I could have gone abroad to study, like Dada,'... but I got married just to defy my father, to show him that I didn't want anything he gave me. All that he wanted was to dominate us. My poor mother couldn't call her soul her own. (81-82)

In case of Aprana, her father's betrayal destroyed everything. In fact, Aparna's father considers women as superior creatures. He often wonders at how he wife Sulu married him as "he looks like a monkey and I sometimes behave like a monkey." (82) He called Aparna his "jewel, his star, his moon, his sun, his piece of gold, of silver...and he destroyed everything when he dealt a mortal wound to his marriage, to their family, to Sulu and Aparna's love for him." (82)

Silence is a strong symbol in *Strangers to Ourselves*, demonstrating both repression and resistance in the gendered structure of Indian culture. On the one hand, silence shows the cultural and social barriers that keep women from speaking out. On the other hand, it gives them a place to think and possibly gain strength. Breaking silence becomes an important way for the main character to confirm herself, as she goes beyond being made invisible and claims a narrative space for her feelings and experiences. This back-and-forth between quiet and voice shows how complicated feminine identity is, stuck between wanting to fit in and wanting to be independent. Language, communication, and symbolic representation are therefore important for finding the limits of one's identity, both in gendered relationships and in larger social groups. Hari consoles Aparna when she was crying remembering her father's death for not giving him anything except taking from him:

'Let it go, Aparna, let it go.' He smoothens her hair and his fingers very gently touch her face, so delicate a touch it is like a blind man trying to see. And then he leans forward and kisses her, a kiss so gentle it's as if he is merely touching her lips with his own...

I had never seen you before, but you didn't seem a stranger, you were already a part of my life. I never thought I would feel the way I did. (99)

Gender roles, identity problems, and the struggle for independence are themes that come up over and over throughout Deshpande's novels. But the way she handles these subjects shows that she is always moving towards more complex and psychologically advanced characterizations. *Strangers to Ourselves* deals with the difficulties of marriage and the conflicts inside ourselves. This is a change from activist feminist aims to more personal inquiries. Deshpande's feminist writing is moving toward bringing together existential and psychological aspects. It continues to represent the changing reality of Indian women while also adding depth to the literary portrayal of female identity.

7. THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS OF IDENTITY AND FEMININE SENSIBILITY

Strangers to Ourselves explores the politics of gender by discussing how Indian social norms support male supremacy and female enslavement. The novel criticizes deeply rooted patriarchal power structures that dictate and limit women's freedom, showing how these political realities affect personal and family interactions. *Strangers to Ourselves* goes beyond obvious discrimination to look at the complicated social dynamics that keep inequality going. This socio-political framing adds depth to the novel's feminist investigation and places it in the larger conversations about women's rights and social justice in India. The problems with identity development in the text are heavily influenced by the middle-class Indian woman's social and economic status. In this setting, women feel a lot of pressure to do what society expects of them because of family honor, social reputes, and gender roles. This often means putting their own needs aside. Finding a balance between these conflicting needs can be difficult because of the psychological toll it takes, which includes internalized conflict and emotional tension. This is a concept that *Strangers to Ourselves* conveys quite well. The book looks at how these social, economic, and cultural issues limit women's ability to define themselves, making them have to carefully balance between resisting and following the rules in their social lives. This realistic picture gives us a critical look at the lives of Indian middle-class women, showing how class, gender, and identity all come together. Aparna, because of her memories of her father's "mortal wound" and her status of divorce, she is always feels hesitant to step into second marital knot though "she thinks if the feel of his body against hers, she remembers she had felt his arousal that night" (103) listening to the CD given by Hari. Aparna thinks that "I never thought I would get this kind of love, I never imagined I would feel this way for a man. So why am I hesitating? What am I afraid of? What is that keeps pulling me back, saying *Take care, take care?*" (103)

Deshpande's feminist point of view makes a clear difference between wanting to be equal to men and wanting to find your own identity without being limited by social roles and relationships. Her main characters typically turn away from the standard feminist rhetoric that focuses on equality in social standing. Instead, they stress on the inner search for true selfhood beyond identities that are forced on them by others. This multifaceted approach changes the way we think about feminism, making it a complex conversation that includes both individualism and societal critique, with a focus on personal freedom and psychological liberation. In Deshpande's work, the inner lives of women, with their contradictions and hopes, become a valid and necessary subject for feminist research. This change makes Indian feminist fiction better by recognizing the different ways that women can empower themselves and the different things that happen to them. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Deshpande uses advanced characterization techniques to show how complicated and conflicted people's minds can be. Using introspective storytelling styles like stream of consciousness and reflective monologue lets us see the protagonist's inner world in a more complex way. For instance, "Aparna is a little puzzled about Hari's careful avoidance of any kind of physical intimacy between them (except for the kisses with which he had declared his love) which is such a contrast to his verbal exuberance...she is glad they haven't rushed into sex...Hari believes that sex should come after marriage, that it has to be sanctified by marriage." (110-111)

The protagonist's view of themselves and their emotional state are greatly affected by the marriages in the novel. Deshpande shows these relationships as complicated and often "inexplicable." They are emotionally distant, full of misunderstandings, and have subtle power dynamics. The novel looks at how marriage, which is usually perceived as a limiting institution, can actually create chances for people to think about themselves and change. Marriage can be both a restriction and a stimulus, which shows how, complicated the relationship between relational dynamics and individual identity creation can happen. In the married life of Madhu, Aparna's sister, the author attempts to explain how a woman can also accommodate herself in a family that might be against the established norms of a society:

They had wondered how a rebellious girl like her would adjust to living with a man, who not only has a wife and two children, but who lived in the midst of a large family of mother, two sisters and their families. But she had coped, she had learnt to become part of them, she had even managed to bring his two children back into the family, into his life. (115)

The protagonist's journey in *Strangers to Ourselves* follows a psychological path from feeling lost and alone to gaining more clarity and understanding of herself. She gradually accepts a more integrated sense of self through processes of reflection and facing her own inconsistencies. This progress means accepting the many parts of her identity, including the ones that used to cause conflict and sorrow. The book says that this kind of reconciliation is important for self-empowerment since it helps the main character transition from being a victim to being in control and accepting. This story is part of a larger feminist movement that sees psychological resilience as an important part of finding one's feminine identity. After a musical performance of Hari, Aparna "can't sleep for a long time. His voice throbs in her ears,

it seems to be plucking some strings inside her, she feel so taut and tense...I am incomplete without him, I want to be with him, I want him near me." (204) When Hari proposes to go for marriage and put an end to life of sneaking, Aparna is not ready for marriage but she says that she wants to live together but not sure about marriage as her previous marriage failed and she witness to many such failed marriages including her parents. She categorically states that marriage mandates expectations, which she was unsure after marriage as she lived alone for too long. She affirms that "Hari, I am not sure I can live my life according to somebody's else's ideas." (253) She remembers the painting of old fraud Vishwamitra and Menaka who gave birth to Shakuntala in the hall of their house in Chandrapur. She ponders "if Hari thinks sex before marriage is wrong, what will he say to unwed motherhood?" (321) Aparna, thus, decides to continue her life with Hari and now "grief that had brought Hari and her together, but the sperm and the ovum recognize neither grief, nor love, nor hate. When they want to come together to create, they do so. And so it has happened to me." (321) She decides to continue the life that she desired.

8. CONCLUSION

Strangers to Ourselves looks at identity and women's feelings in modern Indian society. Deshpande's subtle account of the internal and external problems encountered by middle-class Indian women presents how hard it is to be yourself when you have to deal with patriarchal and cultural norms. The psychological depth, thematic richness, and nuanced storytelling of the novel are all vital contributions to feminist literature and identity discourse. They denote how personal reflection and societal realities are interconnected with the development of feminine identity. The changing perspective of women's identity in modern India in the novel opens up new avenues for more research exploring on psychology, sociology, and literature. These studies would help us to learn more about how identity is constantly shifting because of social, cultural, and personal reasons. Shashi Deshpande's body of work, including *Strangers to Ourselves*, shows that she will always have a position in Indian literary studies. The search for identity and feminine sensibility in her writings is still important, which invites continued critical engagement. This relates to larger issues of gender, culture, and selfhood in Indian literature and beyond.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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