

Identity Crisis in Shashi Deshpande's *Strangers to Ourselves*

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Abstract

The present paper examines the theme of identity crisis in Shashi Deshpande's *Strangers to Ourselves* with special reference to the influence of patriarchal society on women's lives. The novel presents the emotional and psychological journey of Aparna, who struggles to understand herself as she grapples with painful memories, social expectations, and personal relationships. Through her experiences, Deshpande explores the difficulties women face in balancing their individual desires with the responsibilities imposed by family and society. The paper discusses how Aparna gradually moves from confusion and emotional insecurity towards self-awareness and self-acceptance. It also analyses the role of Hari, whose understanding and respectful nature provide emotional support without limiting Aparna's independence. Besides examining the theme of identity crisis, the paper highlights Deshpande's narrative technique, simple language, use of memory, silence, and Indian cultural elements that contribute to the realistic portrayal of the characters. The study argues that identity is not something fixed but a continuous process shaped by personal experiences, relationships, and self-reflection. By presenting Aparna's search for emotional freedom and individuality, *Strangers to Ourselves* encourages readers to rethink traditional ideas about women's identity in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Patriarchy, Selfhood, Feminism, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Women's Identity, Self-discovery, Indian English Literature.

Introduction

Identity is one of the most important aspects of human life because it helps people understand who they are and where they belong. Every individual develops an identity through family, relationships, culture, education, and personal experiences. However, identity is not something that remains unchanged throughout life. It continues to grow and change as people face different situations and challenges. Sometimes, unexpected experiences, emotional pain, or social pressure lead people to question their beliefs, values, and sense of purpose in life. This situation is known as an identity crisis. During such a period, individuals often feel confused about themselves and struggle to find peace and direction.

For women, the search for identity is often more difficult because they have to balance their personal dreams with the expectations of society. In many patriarchal societies, women are expected to fulfil traditional roles as daughters, wives, and mothers before thinking about their own wishes and ambitions. As a result, many women suppress their emotions and sacrifice their individuality to maintain family relationships and social acceptance. Such pressures frequently create emotional conflicts and make it difficult for women to develop an independent sense of self.

Indian English literature has given significant importance to this issue by portraying women who struggle to understand themselves while living within social and cultural boundaries. Among the writers who have explored this theme with great sensitivity, Shashi Deshpande occupies a

special place. Instead of presenting women as either completely rebellious or completely submissive, she portrays them as ordinary human beings who experience fear, loneliness, hope, disappointment, and emotional conflict. Her novels focus on the inner lives of women and show that the search for identity is often a slow and painful journey.

Strangers to Ourselves is one such novel in which Deshpande examines the emotional journey of Aparna, a woman who tries to rebuild her life after facing personal disappointment and emotional suffering. Rather than concentrating on external conflicts alone, the novel explores the psychological struggles that prevent individuals from understanding themselves. Aparna's memories, relationships, and experiences become important stages in her journey towards self-discovery. Through her character, Deshpande suggests that identity is not given by society but gradually developed through self-awareness and personal growth.

The title of the novel itself carries a deeper meaning. The phrase *Strangers to Ourselves* suggests that people often know others better than they know themselves. They may spend years fulfilling social responsibilities and also judging others while ignoring their own emotions, virtues, vices, desires, and inner needs. Consequently, they become strangers to their own feelings and aspirations. Deshpande uses Aparna's experiences to show that true happiness becomes possible only when an individual begins to understand and accept oneself without fear or guilt.

At the beginning of the novel, Deshpande introduces this idea through a thoughtful observation: *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*(p.no.1).

This statement introduces one of the central ideas of the novel. It suggests that human beings naturally seek love, belonging, security, and a meaningful place in life. While society often measures success through family, marriage, or social status, Deshpande encourages readers to think beyond these traditional ideas. Through Aparna's experiences, she shows that true fulfilment comes from understanding one's own identity and learning to live with confidence, dignity, and self-respect.

Thus, *Strangers to Ourselves* presents identity as a continuous journey rather than a final destination. The novel shows that self-discovery is not achieved in a single moment but develops slowly through reflection, experience, and emotional growth. By exploring Aparna's struggles within a patriarchal society, Deshpande highlights the importance of self-awareness, independence, and the courage to create one's own identity.

Feminist Perspective

The concept of identity occupies a central position in feminist literary criticism because it examines how women construct a sense of self within societies that have historically limited their freedom and individuality. Feminist scholars argue that identity is not determined solely by biological differences but is shaped by social institutions, cultural traditions, family relationships, and gender expectations. In patriarchal societies, women are often encouraged to define themselves through their relationships with others rather than through their own aspirations and achievements. Consequently, many women experience conflicts between their personal desires and the roles imposed upon them by society.

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Deshpande explores these feminist concerns through the character of Aparna. Her struggle is not simply against individual circumstances but against the invisible pressures created by patriarchal expectations and emotional conditioning. Aparna's search for identity illustrates that self-discovery requires courage, self-reflection, and the willingness to question beliefs that have been accepted without criticism.

A feminist literary approach forms the theoretical foundation of this study. Feminist criticism examines the unequal distribution of power between men and women and investigates the ways in which literature represents female experiences within patriarchal societies. Since *Strangers to Ourselves* focuses upon a woman's search for selfhood while negotiating social expectations and emotional suffering, feminist theory provides an appropriate framework for interpreting the novel. The ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter help explain how patriarchal values influence women's identities and how female consciousness is represented through literary narratives.

Historical and Social Background

To understand the theme of identity crisis in *Strangers to Ourselves*, it is important to examine the historical and social environment in which the novel is situated. Shashi Deshpande's fiction reflects the changing realities of post-independence Indian society, particularly the experiences of educated middle-class women who find themselves caught between traditional cultural expectations and modern aspirations. While legal and educational reforms have improved women's access to education and employment, deeply rooted patriarchal values continue to shape family relationships, marriage, and personal identity.

The decades following India's independence witnessed significant social transformation. Women increasingly entered schools, universities, and professional careers, creating opportunities for greater economic participation and intellectual growth. However, these developments were accompanied by continuing expectations that women should remain primarily responsible for maintaining family harmony and fulfilling domestic duties. As a result, many women experienced tension between their individual ambitions and the responsibilities assigned to them by society. This conflict forms an important background to Deshpande's portrayal of Aparna's search for identity.

Another important aspect of the novel's social background is the influence of memory and family history upon individual identity. Personal experiences are rarely isolated from cultural traditions, childhood influences, and inherited values. Women often carry emotional burdens created not only by their own experiences but also by expectations passed from one generation to another. Deshpande illustrates that self-discovery requires confronting these inherited beliefs and reassessing their relevance in contemporary life.

The rise of feminist thought in India has also contributed to a greater awareness of women's rights, identity, and self-expression. Indian feminist writers and scholars have emphasised that women should not be defined solely through their relationships with men but recognised as autonomous individuals with independent aspirations. Deshpande's fiction reflects this intellectual climate while avoiding simplistic solutions. Rather than portraying dramatic rebellion, she presents gradual psychological growth, self-reflection, and emotional healing as meaningful forms of resistance against patriarchal conditioning.

Within this social and historical framework, *Strangers to Ourselves* becomes more than the story of one woman's personal journey. It reflects the experiences of many educated women who seek to reconcile their past with their present, their personal aspirations with social responsibilities, and their emotional needs with cultural expectations. Aparna's search for identity, therefore, represents a broader human struggle for self-understanding, dignity, and inner freedom in a rapidly changing society.

Psychological aspect of Identity

One of the distinguishing features of *Strangers to Ourselves* is Shashi Deshpande's profound exploration of the psychological aspects of identity. Rather than presenting identity as a fixed or predetermined characteristic, the novel portrays it as a dynamic process shaped by memory, relationships, emotions, and personal experiences. Aparna's journey demonstrates that identity is continuously reconstructed as individuals confront their past, question their beliefs, and redefine their understanding of themselves. Through this psychological exploration, Deshpande reveals that selfhood is achieved not through external recognition but through honest self-examination and emotional acceptance.

Identity as a Continuous Process

The novel suggests that identity is never complete or permanent. Human beings constantly change as they encounter new experiences, relationships, and challenges. Aparna's understanding of herself develops gradually rather than suddenly. Throughout the narrative, she reflects upon her childhood, family relationships, emotional disappointments, and personal choices. Each memory contributes to a deeper awareness of her own personality and encourages her to reassess the assumptions that have shaped her life. Deshpande, therefore, presents identity as an evolving process that requires continuous reflection and personal growth.

Memory and the self-improvement

Memory occupies a central position in Aparna's search for identity. The narrative frequently moves between the present and the past, demonstrating that personal identity cannot be understood without examining previous experiences. Childhood memories, family interactions, and emotional relationships continue to influence Aparna's present behaviour and emotional responses. These memories are not simply recollections of past events; they become instruments through which she interprets her life and recognises patterns of emotional conflict.

Deshpande also illustrates that memory can be selective and subjective. Individuals often remember events differently as they gain new experiences and emotional maturity. Aparna's reflections reveal that understanding the past is not merely an act of remembering but also an act of reinterpretation. By revisiting earlier experiences, she gradually discovers meanings that were previously hidden from her.

Emotional Conflict and Inner Chaos

Aparna's psychological struggle is marked by emotional uncertainty and inner conflict. She experiences moments of confusion, self-doubt, and hesitation while attempting to understand her own desires and responsibilities. These emotional conflicts arise because she must negotiate between personal aspirations and social expectations. Deshpande portrays these struggles with remarkable realism, demonstrating that psychological suffering often develops through ordinary experiences rather than dramatic incidents.

The novel also emphasises that emotional conflict should not be viewed as a sign of weakness. Instead, it becomes an essential stage in the process of self-discovery. Aparna's willingness to confront uncomfortable emotions enables her to gain greater self-awareness and emotional resilience.

Loneliness and Self-Reflection

Although Aparna interacts with many people throughout the novel, some of her most significant experiences occur during moments of solitude. These periods of loneliness create opportunities for introspection and honest self-analysis. Rather than presenting solitude as purely negative, Deshpande suggests that it can become a meaningful space for personal growth. Away from social expectations and external pressures, Aparna is able to examine her thoughts, fears, and aspirations with greater clarity.

This emphasis on introspection reflects Deshpande's belief that genuine identity cannot be imposed by society but must emerge from an individual's own understanding of herself. Aparna's solitude, therefore, becomes an important stage in her psychological development.

Healing Through Self-Acceptance

The novel ultimately presents identity as closely connected with emotional healing. Aparna gradually learns that personal growth requires accepting both strengths and weaknesses instead of attempting to satisfy unrealistic social expectations. Self-acceptance enables her to move beyond guilt, fear, and uncertainty while developing greater confidence in her own judgement. Deshpande does not portray healing as a dramatic transformation or a complete resolution of all difficulties. Instead, she presents it as a gradual process that develops through reflection, understanding, and emotional maturity. This realistic portrayal emphasises that personal growth is an ongoing journey rather than a final destination.

Psychological Realism

One of the greatest strengths of *Strangers to Ourselves* is its psychological realism. The novel avoids sensational events and instead focuses on the ordinary emotional experiences that shape human identity. Deshpande carefully examines thoughts, memories, conversations, and silences to reveal the complexity of Aparna's inner life. Readers are encouraged to recognise that identity crises often emerge quietly through everyday experiences rather than extraordinary circumstances.

The psychological dimension of identity presented in *Strangers to Ourselves* extends beyond Aparna's personal experiences. It reflects the struggles of many individuals who attempt to reconcile their past with their present while negotiating social expectations and personal aspirations. Deshpande suggests that identity is strengthened not by external approval but by the courage to understand oneself honestly. Through Aparna's journey, the novel emphasises that self-awareness, emotional resilience, and personal acceptance are essential foundations for authentic identity.

One of the central ideas in the novel is that unresolved experiences from the past continue to affect the present. Emotional pain, disappointments, misunderstandings, and unspoken feelings do not disappear simply because time passes. Instead, they remain within the individual and

often shape future relationships and decisions. Aparna's journey demonstrates that avoiding painful memories only prolongs emotional conflict, whereas confronting them opens the possibility of healing.

Deshpande suggests that healing does not occur through forgetting the past but through understanding it. Remembering becomes meaningful when it enables individuals to learn from experience rather than remain imprisoned by it. Aparna's emotional growth, therefore, depends upon her willingness to revisit difficult memories with honesty and courage.

This emphasis on memory challenges patriarchal narratives that define women only through their social roles. Instead, the novel presents women's memories as important sources of knowledge and self-understanding. Aparna's reflections demonstrate that women possess individual histories deserving recognition and interpretation. Memory, therefore, becomes a form of resistance against the silencing of female experience.

Identity Crisis in a Patriarchal Society

The idea of identity crisis occupies an important place in contemporary Indian English literature, especially in the writings of women novelists. Many female characters struggle to understand themselves because they live in a society where their personal choices are often influenced by family traditions and social expectations. Instead of living according to their own wishes, they are expected to fulfil the roles assigned to them by others. This often creates a conflict between their inner desires and their social responsibilities. Shashi Deshpande presents this conflict with great sensitivity in *Strangers to Ourselves*.

The novel shows that patriarchy does not always control women through open violence or strict rules. Sometimes it works in quieter ways through customs, expectations, and ideas about how a "good woman" should behave. Women are expected to adjust, remain patient, and place the needs of their family before their own. Because of these expectations, many women ignore their own emotions and gradually lose confidence in themselves. Deshpande suggests that such silent pressures can create an identity crisis, where a woman begins to question who she really is beyond the roles society has given her.

At one point in the novel, Aparna begins to look at her own life more honestly instead of allowing fear to guide her decisions. Her growing self-awareness shows that identity develops when individuals accept both their strengths and weaknesses. Rather than escaping from her memories, she gradually learns to face them with courage. Through this process, Deshpande suggests that emotional healing becomes possible only when people stop defining themselves through their past failures.

Aparna's Identity Crisis: Between Past and Present

Aparna's character is at the centre of *Strangers to Ourselves*. Through her, Shashi Deshpande shows how difficult it can be for a person to move forward after emotional pain. Aparna is not only struggling with the present; she is also carrying the memories of her past. These memories often return unexpectedly and affect the way she thinks and behaves. Because of this, she finds it difficult to trust people and to believe that life can become better again.

One of the reasons behind Aparna's identity crisis is that she is unable to separate her present from her past. She remembers the painful experiences of her earlier life again and again. These memories create fear and uncertainty, making it difficult for her to accept new relationships.

Deshpande shows that emotional wounds do not disappear quickly. They remain in a person's mind and influence later decisions. In Aparna's case, her past becomes a burden that prevents her from seeing herself with confidence.

Why didn't I give him my mobile number? she thinks. (p.no.10)

As the story moves forward, Aparna slowly begins to question her own fears. Instead of running away from painful memories, she starts looking at them more honestly. This change is not sudden. It happens little by little through her experiences and conversations with the people around her. Deshpande presents this process in a realistic way because personal growth usually takes time. Aparna's journey reminds readers that understanding oneself is often more difficult than understanding others.

Another important point is that Aparna does not blame society alone for her problems. She also examines her own feelings and decisions. This self-examination makes her character more realistic. She understands that while society influences people's lives, individuals also need the courage to face their own fears. By accepting both her strengths and weaknesses, she gradually develops a stronger sense of self.

Hari's Role in Aparna's Self-Discovery

Hari plays an important role in Aparna's journey towards self-discovery. Unlike the traditional male characters often seen in patriarchal society, he is understanding, patient, and respectful. He does not try to control Aparna or force her to forget her past. Instead, he accepts her as she is and gives her the freedom to make her own choices. Because of his calm and supportive nature, Aparna slowly begins to trust herself again.

Hari's love for classical music also reflects his personality. His music creates a peaceful atmosphere and helps Aparna move away from the pain of her past. Deshpande uses music as a symbol of hope and emotional healing. Hari's presence reminds Aparna that relationships can be based on equality, understanding, and mutual respect rather than power or dominance.

As Hari says, *It made it easy for me to approach you.* This simple statement reflects his honesty and openness. He does not hide his intentions or pretend to be someone else. His sincerity becomes the foundation of his relationship with Aparna and gradually helps her overcome fear and emotional insecurity.

Through Hari's character, Deshpande presents a positive image of masculinity. He supports Aparna without limiting her independence. Thus, Hari becomes an important part of Aparna's journey towards self-confidence and self-acceptance.

Conclusion

Shashi Deshpande's *Strangers to Ourselves* presents identity as a journey of self-understanding rather than something fixed from birth. Through Aparna's experiences, the novel shows how social expectations, painful memories, and personal relationships influence a woman's sense of self. Living in a patriarchal society often makes women suppress their own wishes to meet the expectations of others. Aparna's gradual transformation shows that true identity develops when an individual accepts oneself with honesty and confidence.

The novel also offers hope through Hari's character, who represents trust, equality, and emotional support. His relationship with Aparna shows that healthy relationships are built on

respect rather than control. By combining psychological realism with simple language and realistic characters, Deshpande encourages readers to think about the importance of self-respect, emotional freedom, and personal choice.

The novel also suggests that identity is closely connected with self-acceptance. Aparna begins to realise that she cannot change what has already happened, but she can decide how to live in the present. This understanding gives her emotional strength. Instead of allowing her past to control her future, she slowly learns to make decisions based on hope rather than fear. This marks an important step in her journey towards self-discovery.

The novel, therefore, presents identity as something that is constantly changing. It is influenced by family, society, relationships, memories, and personal experiences. Deshpande does not provide easy answers to the problems faced by women. Instead, she encourages readers to think about the importance of self-respect, emotional strength, and the freedom to make independent choices. Aparna's journey shows that true identity is discovered when a person learns to recognise their own value instead of depending entirely on society's expectations.

Therefore, *Strangers to Ourselves* is not only the story of one woman's struggle but also a reflection on the search for identity in contemporary Indian society.

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