



SHASHI DESHPANDE'S 'STRANGERS TO OURSELVES': A STORY OF INEXPLICABLE MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

The present article attempts to explore the intricate nature of marital relationships in Deshpande's novel, Strangers to Ourselves. Shashi Deshpande, the author of ten novels, two novellas, four books for children and a large number of short stories, has been writing about issues and problems of middle-class Indian women caught in the trap of Indian patriarchy. She has a comprehensive understanding of the grass-root reality and women's place and position, sorrows and sufferings, plight and predicament, pain and agony in a male-centric Indian society. Her women protagonists, by and large, find themselves to be the victims of unjust customs, conventions and traditions which are in favour of men. Unable to bear restrictions and compulsions imposed on them in the name of gender-discrimination in their parental homes, they use marriage as an escape route, but unfortunately, in most cases, marriage becomes a trap for them. They are humiliated, tortured and exploited in one way or the other. They face physical violence in the form of unwanted marital-sex, almost a rape and mental torture. Her novels move around marital relationships which are marred by the evils such as male pride, ego and domination, patriarchal attitude to women, lack of understanding and communication.

Keywords: *exploitation, inexplicable, mangalsutra, promiscuity, reconciliation.*



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Shashi Deshpande, a Sahitya Academy Award-winning Indian woman novelist, depicts the plight and predicament, pain and anguish, suppression and exploitation of educated and career-oriented middle-class Indian women caught in the trap Indian patriarchy. Her novels move around the woman and her world. Intricate web of human relationships has been one of her major concerns since she started writing. The woman, she believes, occupies an important position as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, and most importantly, as a human being in all human relationships. She struggles to fine and preserve her identity in all these relationships. However, the relationship in which she is most interested is a man-woman

relationship in which the woman is expected to play a secondary and inferior role. In an interview given to Vanamala Viswanatha, she said: “It is necessary for women to live within relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother you do this and no further, then one becomes unhappy. This is what I have tried to convey in my writings”. (13).

Her novels deal with the theme of marriage and marital relationships. To be true, ideally, marriage is a beautiful thing. It is a special kind of friendship, a special kind of partnership between two people from the opposite sex, people with different tastes, interests, attitudes, likes and dislikes. It plays a vital role in the life of men and women. It is a turning point especially in the life of the woman. It, according to Madhav-kaka, in *Roots and Shadows*, is a difficult business for the two people to merge into one identity, but certain things in common such as background, language, customs, rituals, culture make it easier and bearable to some extent. For Gajanan Dandekar, in *Strangers to Ourselves*, it asks for the impossible; it demands something which is beyond attainment. It is an ordeal especially for the woman as she is expected to adjust herself completely to a new environment, customs and conventions of her marital home. It allows her to keep her social dignity intact and to find sexual fulfillment as loved one and mother. It provides for her need for sex, love, security, stability and children. Taimavshi, in *Strangers to Ourselves*, says: “Apu, marriage gives you security; it leaves you free to live the rest of your life without worrying about loneliness or sex. And the greatest boon – you can have children. Life is transformed when you have children”. (145).

Happy and successful marriage is not everyone’s cup of tea. Marriages, love as well as arranged, in Deshpande’s novels, with some exceptions, are unhappy failures. They are fraught with one or the other kind of disease or malady. The demand of the lifetime love and commitment it makes is not possible for everyone. They fail on account of various factors such as sexual promiscuity, male-ego, male-domination, women’s growing economic independence and awareness, the patriarchal attitude to women, men’s treating women as the objects of sex, lack of understanding and so on. Circumstances, too, seem to be responsible for the failure of marriages. The belief that a husband and a wife are to satisfy each other throughout their lives is monstrosity which gives rise to hypocrisy, lying, hostility and unhappiness which ultimately are responsible for the failures of marriages. Outwardly, the marital relationship appears to be based on equality, mutual love and trust, but inwardly it is marred by the evils in the form of male pride, male-ego, male-domination and inhuman marital sex which seek to marginalize the role of the woman in Indian patriarchy.

Marriage makes the woman sacrifice her name, person, self, identity, freedom, virginity, her dreams and aspirations. Simone de Beauvoir writes: “In marrying . . . she takes his name; she belongs to his religion, his class; she joins his family, she becomes his ‘half’ . . . She gives him her person, virginity and a rigorous fidelity being required . . . No doubt marriage can afford certain material and sexual conveniences: it frees the individual from loneliness, it establishes him security in space and time by giving him a home and children; it is a definite fulfillment of his existence”. (445-451). It is something that enslaves the woman to a man in one form or the other. Indu, the protagonist of the novel, *Roots and Shadows*, calls it a cage with two trapped animals, husband and wife, glaring hatred at each other. She also says: “Marriage means living with a man. You have to listen to him, endure his habits, his smell, his touch, his likes and dislikes. You have to sleep with him, bear him children”. (124). It expects the woman to submit passively to the demands and desires of her husband and to accept her husband who, as per conventions and traditions, is above her in each and every respect. She is often defined as an object used to satisfy the male sexual desire. Marriage assigns her the functions of satisfying her husband’s sexual needs, providing children to her family and taking care of her husband, children and household. Deshpande is essentially concerned about the issues and problems related to marital relationships. The present article intends to explore intricate and inexplicable marital relationships in her novel, *Strangers to Ourselves*.

Deshpande’s latest novel, *Strangers to Ourselves*, is a story of love between two persons from different fields - Aparna, an oncologist and Hari, a rising singer. It draws us deep into the pleasures, sorrows, contradictions and conflicts of falling in love and marrying. It moves around the theme of sex, love and marriage. Aparna’s first marriage is a tragic failure. Aparna tells a tragic story of her marriage. She says: “I was raw and sore from my mother’s death, from my separation from my father, I hadn’t spoken to him after my mother’s death . . . When I got to the States, I was lonely and homesick. Then I saw this man on my first day in the hospital . . . He had been in my college . . . We began to see each other, we went out on our off days . . . And of course we began sleeping together . . . We did get married a month or two later. In a week I knew I’d made a mistake . . . He was shallow . . . Both of us knew it was no good, both of us knew we were wrong for each other . . . But we gave ourselves a last chance. We went to Paris for a holiday together. I was there when I got the news of my father’s heart attack. I came back home, Baba died. And I never went back”. (169-170). Life of their marriage is very short. For her husband, marriage is no more than sex; it has nothing to do with a noble feeling of love which is the base of marital

relationships. She, too, admits that she sleeps with him not for love, not even for lust, or for her bodily need, but just out of desperation and loneliness. After she decides to end her marriage, she wants to get rid of everything associated with it, with the man she has married. She discards everything she has, including her *mangalsutra* and her ring. She loses her trust in marriage and decides not to marry again.

She meets Shree Hari Pandit and falls in his love. Their frequent visits bring them emotionally and physically together. Hari is eager to marry her but she is not prepared to marry him. Being afraid of marriage, she is determined not to marry again. In a response to his question, 'will you marry me, Aparna?', she responds: "Hari, I love you and I want us to live together. I am as sure of that as I am of anything else in this life. But I am not sure about marriage" . . . Marriage makes a tight knot, marriage means expectations. We'll quarrel about money, you won't take my money, we'll quarrel about small things. No, I don't want to go through all that again. I've lived alone for too long, Hari, I am not sure I can live my life according to somebody else's ideas". (251-253). She offers herself physically to him and wants to a part of his life without marrying him. She prefers a live-in relationship to a marital relationship. Hari has been very uncomfortable with himself since the day of his physical relationship with Aparna. He writes: "I am uncomfortable with myself . . . It was my great love for you that drove me into loving you through your body. I don't want you ever to think that I came to you only for sex, for your body. I came to you because of my love, because of my desire to express my love for you through our bodies. Your body is sacred to me". (220).

Hari is convinced that she is negative about marriage just because her first marriage didn't work, just because her parents' marriage didn't work. He requests her to think of marriages that worked, but in vain. She is ready to live with him in one home without marriage for which she is not ready. He decides to avoid a physical relationship until she decides about marriage. Jyoti, who wants her to marry him, says: "You want a perfect marriage and you are afraid it won't happen. You're a perfectionist, you're crying even before the milk has boiled over. Come on, doc, nothing in the world can be perfect . . . We are born flawed, we must accept that. And you can't sacrifice your today for a future you think may be bad . . . This whole idea of understanding each other seems highly exaggerated to me. It can never happen to any two people, least of all to a man and a woman . . . Whatever time you have, doc, live it with the man you love". (260-262). Taimavshi, Madhu's mother, too, wants her to marry him. She wants her not to burden herself with the failure of her parents' marriage. She is right when she says: "Each relationship is different, each marriage is different". (269). Aparna admires the courage of people who, having had one bad marriage,

get into another. She wonders how Mel can be so optimistic about her second marriage to another man. She thinks of her own idea of living with Hari - not tied in the tight bond of marriage, but tied together only by love. She thinks a lot and ultimately prepares herself to be caught in the trap of marriage.

Aparna's parents, Gajanan and Sulabha, initially a happy couple loving each other intensely, meet an unhappy end when her mother leaves home never to come back. She is determined not to forgive her husband who gets involved in an extra-marital relationship with a singer and actress. Their marriage breaks up unexpectedly in a flash. Aparna wonders: "Why, then, did she refuse to forgive him in the end? Why did all those years of being together, of loving and being loved, not matter at all? . . . Does marriage mean tying two people in so tight a knot that to live together is difficult, and to separate is death?" (148). She thinks of how her mother, a typical Indian woman, had shaped her life to her husband's needs and requirements. She ends her marriage in a flash. Hari is shocked to know the story of Aparna's parents' break-up. He thinks of his grandparents, of their happy and peaceful marital life together, of its simplicity and how they loved, cooperated and complemented each other, how they formed a complete unit that made their lives so much easier and more meaningful. They had been a happy couple since the day of their marriage.

Marriage of Jyoti's parents is not happy one. It is deeply rooted in marital sex. About their marriage, Jyoti says: "My father was an abominable man . . . I believe my father slept with her every night of their married life, every single night, except perhaps when she had her periods". (Deshpande 216). Prabha, her mother, even did not know that she could say no to her husband in bed; she thought that it was her duty to do what he wanted. She even thought of scratching her face and spoiling her looks so that she would save herself from sex. Jyoti, an unloved child, defies her father whose focus was Deepak, the son of the family and the heir, and marries Akash and receives a gift of marriage in the form of children. For her, sex is a means of reconciliation between husband and wife; it is a means of bridging a growing gap between them. About her strained relationship with Akash, she says: "We fought, oh god, how fiercely we fought. Both of us had bad tempers. It was only sex that saved us; sex is the one drug that brings about complete forgetfulness, amnesia almost, even if it's for a few moments. (Deshpande 217). After her husband's death, it is difficult for her to control her desire. She says: "I found myself so desperate with desire; I let myself get into a relationship with an old friend. It was only for slacking my bodily desires, nothing more, but it soon changed and I wanted a man in my life, doc, I wanted a man to live with. We thought we

would think of marriage at some time". (Deshpande 296). However, they could not marry because of Tejas, her son.

Deepak, Jyoti's brother leaves home because he can not bear the way his father terrorized Prabha, his mother. He marries Mel but they can not move on with their marital life in spite of their love for each other and their love for their son. According to Mel, her marriage to Deepak was more daunting as a result of their different races, cultures and religions. She is marrying a colleague of hers teaching in the same school for years. Madhu, a rebellious girl, marries and adjusts to living with Abbas, a Muslim, who not only had a wife and two children, but who lived in the midst of a large family of a mother, two sisters and their families. She happily copes and becomes a part of her marital family. She is friendly even with Nilu, Abbas's first wife and the children as well. It is the woman like Madhu who sets the tone for the way a couple lives. She believes that sex plays a vital role in keeping marital relationship intact. She says: "You can't insure your marriage against all possible problems . . . Once you sleep together, everything falls into place and your relationship becomes *pukka*". (Deshpande 115-116).

Ahalya's second marriage with the painter is happy. She does not consider her second marriage a sin. She writes: "When Durga was born, the painter's happiness and my own joy healed, to some extent, the wound inside me. I knew then that what I had done was not a sin, it was not even wrong . . . My two girls gave me new life, new hope . . . I have no regrets . . . It is not a sin at all . . . I have accepted the reality of my life and it is enough for me". (Deshpande 280-284). Rohit and Arundhati is a happy couple with their adopted two children, a boy and a girl. Aparna learns a lot about Arundhati's family life. Her mother died in an accident. After her death, her father got into a relationship with Kasturi. Arundhati says: "I hated him and I hated her . . . We had been estranged even earlier, but after this I thought I'd lost my father. Luckily we were able to reconcile and the woman, Kasturi, became my friend, she is my friend . . . My father and Kasturi are still together, they didn't get married. But they've had their lives, they have children". (Deshpande 243). It is true that marital happiness and success are abstract concepts. Their meanings change from couple to couple, person to person.

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