CHAPTER – 3

The Dilemma of

Living With the Absurd
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The western theory of Existentialism ponders over the nature of life and existence in general. When viewed from a broader perspective, it provides insight into the happenings of the world which, in turn, tends to influence and shape our thought process. As Sailesh Ranjan Bhattacharya expresses:

Existentialism is fundamentally a philosophy of man. It is mainly concerned with an individual person existing in the world, with the problems he has to face in life, with the ways he faces them, with his passions and emotions, and, above all, with his personal outlook on life. (1)

Existentialist writing has some inherent thematic engagements such as loneliness, alienation, meaninglessness, and internal emptiness, which makes the existentialist thinkers like Albert Camus to address them in their writing but with significantly altered implications. Camus’ philosophy attends to the issues concerned with an individual and the futility, which governs one’s life. Besides, he also suggests a remedy to continue sustenance in this absurd living world. Shashi Deshpande’s novels hold immense significance with regard to the existentialist questions posed by thinkers time to time. The writer through her novels portrays the diversity of human life mingled with myriad perspectives and innumerable internal dilemmas. Her novels signify the humanity in general and also discuss the explicit human behavior in the light of implicit crisis and difficult choices.

Deshpande’s works need to be explored in their philosophical accentuation. Hence, the lens of Camus’ existentialism lends an alternate positioning to the writings of Shashi Deshpande by rendering a more universal appeal to her portrayal of individuals within
the network of relationships. In an Interview with Geeta Gangadharan, “Denying the Otherness”, Shashi Deshpande indicates her interest in the intricacies and complexities of human relationship. She opines:

Human relationship is what a writer is involved with. Person to person and person to society-these are the 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.(252)

Deshpande’s novel *A matter of Time*, which was published in the year 1996, projects the transition of an individual from the life of a householder to a celibate. The novel brings forth the lives of four women, Manorama, Kalyani, Sumi and Aru. Set in the modern day Karnataka, *A Matter of Time* explores the complex web of intricacies woven within familial relationships, comprising three generations of men and women. Manorama and Vithalrao, whose daughter Kalyani is the protagonist’s mother, belong to the first generation of the family. Vithalrao, as a father, never grieved the birth of the girl child Kalyani, but his wife did. Instead, the father wanted his daughter to become an engineer, but the mother was little perturbed by the advances of a boy towards her daughter and also about the fact that her daughter wasn’t so attractive by looks. Physical features and external looks happen to be the most important attribute for a woman to get married and find a suitable suitor. Manorama discontinued her daughter’s further education and got her married to her own brother on the pretext that the family property would remain in the family. As Kalyani gave birth to a daughter, the fear that her husband might marry another woman on the same ground became one significant reason why the relationship between the daughter and the mother never seemed to be cordial. Shripati and Kalyani, as the second generation in the family, did not share a cordial marital relationship. The rift developed when Kalyani lost her mentally retarded son at the railway station, when he
suddenly went missing. Shripati returned home, only to speak silence to his wife. The third generation in the family is presented by Kalyani’s daughter, Sumi and her husband Gopal.

Gopal leaves home suddenly on one fine day, with no valid reason, to turn from householder responsibilities to celibacy. At this major turn in the plot of the novel Aru, Gopal and Sumi’s daughter, emerges as a significant character to comprehend unexplainable phenomena of life. She tries to grasp the abandonment of responsibilities by her father towards the family. She is ignorant, yet holds a steadfastness, like her mother Sumi. She explores certain new and unexpected relationships that are bound to stir the present course of her life. Sumi battles with her own self when she realizes that Gopal has to move away. He wants to assume his identity in the role he has been assigned in this lifetime, in order to fetch a meaning in his life through the pursuit of his happiness.

Though, the idea of embarking on this pursuit is a solitary road for all individuals, the challenge is intensified when Gopal wishes to escape all his responsibilities or instead place them on the shoulder of his wife. Sumi emerges more successful in the walk of life. She learns to act amidst adverse circumstances. Despite having been drowned in a plethora of emotional realities, she however combats against the laid down emotions of anger and remorse in order to accomplish an act of justice in any circumstance.

What is it, Gopal, I will ask him, that makes a man in this age of acquisition and possession walk out on his family and all that he owns? Because, and I remember this so clearly, it was you who said that we are shaped by the age we live in, by the society we are part of. How then can you, in this age, a part of this society, turn your back on everything in your life?(27)
Sumi experiences an existentialist anguish within herself, when she can not resist the sense of pity for herself, on account of surrounding circumstances. She feels a deep sense of loneliness, a feel of abandonment that becomes a reality of life for her. It is the realization of the ‘absurd’ and its incomprehensible nature. Sumi gauges two priorities existing at either sides in her walk along the path of the absurd. The first is to feel a sense of remorse in understanding the situation in which she is placed, not out of choice but on account of fate. The second is to cater to the responsibilities of the world and also of her own self that makes her emerge victorious, having withstood a big trauma in her life. Sumi experiences extreme loneliness in her life, both at the emotional and physical platforms, yet she responds to this existentialist pang in a positive manner. Kennedy underlines this similar mode of thought from Camus’ *Notebooks*:

> Living with one’s passions amounts to living with one’s sufferings, which are the counterpoise, the corrective, the balance and the price. When a man has learned- and not on paper- how to remain alone with his suffering, how to overcome his longing to flee, [the illusions that others may share,] then he has little left to learn. (Newfield 58-59)

Sumi is an apt illustration of the same sentiment in this regard. She faces the trauma of a deserted wife and loss of partner. The novel becomes an existentialist tale in divulging how Sumi with courage, dignity, responsibility and independent spirit, even after being placed amidst hostile circumstances, reaches the stage of self-sufficiency and self fulfillment. Having identified the absurd, the need of the hour further is to live and not to succumb to its uncontrollable presence. Acceptance of these revelations should disperse disillusion drawing the curtains of the world. Gopal finds his deliverance in a world beyond his daily existence and, quite contrastingly, Sumi finds her deliverance in the world wherein she resides. Gopal puts forth his thinking in the words, “Destiny is just us,
and therefore inescapable, because we can never escape ourselves. Certain actions are inevitable because we are what we are. In a sense, we walk on chalked lines drawn by our own selves.”(26) He feels that human beings are responsible for their own salvation. But the absurdity around individual is bestowed with the responsibility, to identify one’s temporal meaning in the activity that one is summoned to. Moving away from what the world wants an individual to cater to, underlies the sense of escape into one’s own self or in the transcendence, a context which Camus revolts.

One of their problems is therefore to try to create new values in an incoherent universe without restoring at the same time a deity who might be interpreted as giving absolute sanction to these values, or as embodying a principle of coherence. (Cruickshank 10)

Sumi experiences the same absurd one day. The narrator describes, “One day, like any other day when Sumi is lazing around in the couch watching TV, which displayed the song “Jeena Yahaan, Marna Yahaan, Iske Siwa Jana Kahan”(8) Individuals have just this world to make up the best of it. John Cruickshank in his book, Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt states:

In the interests of what he believes to be lucidity and honesty of mind he insists on an insoluble conflict between desire for life and the fact of death, between the here and now which he knows, and the hereafter of which he knows nothing. He regards temporal, mortal life as the only reality and the only happiness of which he has certainty. (35)

Gopal confides to Sumi that he wants to withdraw from the responsibilities of this life, and move to a stage of celibacy. Sumi stands apart from all the other characters as she takes up this abandonment and responds to life immediately without any remorse. Kalyani, who fears that history is repeating in their family while witnessing Gopal walk out on Sumi, makes her daughter to hold and see through the situation. She intends to
showcase the sense of meaning entwined in the myriad relations that surround her life.

As commented by Gurudarshan Singh on Kalyani:

   In her attempts at making sense of the situation, she gradually moves towards an understanding that perhaps, whatever we do, we are always giving the past a place in our lives. However, Kalyani has come to terms with the past and she reminds Sumi of a spider she had seen a few days ago, spinning an intricate delicate web into a beautiful design because of the variety of relationships she has at present. (Singh 12)

Deshpande features the end of pursuit in her novels through relationships. Human relationships are the most complicating and the most mysterious. Jasbir Jain, in her book Gendered Realities and Human Spaces: The Writing of Shashi Deshpande, expresses her concern in this regard:

   The ambivalence that is built into family relationships works at several levels and pulls the individual in different directions, on one hand the need for independence and on the other the need to belong. The individual responds to these needs differently at different stages of life. The basis of family life remains the man-woman relationship even as this has to expand and embrace other ties to sustain itself. (36)

Sumi, feels that if anything is to be done, it has to be done within the confines of the world.

   That this world is all we have and therefore there is nowhere else for us to go? That we have to live here and die here? Or does it mean: this is what we have, this area of action is enough for us, we live here and die here, we need no more? ((Deshpande 9)

After the desertion by her husband, firstly she enfolds herself within a death like silence but later on, she cools down her temperament and even while everyone in the family has been cursing Gopal, she sets him free and accepts it. But, somehow, the unfamiliarity and strangeness of the experience stay lurking at one corner. Though this void does not show
very frequently, yet the pangs of loneliness, the sudden estrangement from the loved ones and the fear to embark alone on an untraversed path, send a chill down the spine.

Emptiness, I realized then, is always waiting for us. The nightmare we most dread, of waking up among total strangers, is one we can never escape. And so it’s a lie, it means nothing, It’s just deceiving ourselves when we say we are not alone. (Deshpande 52)

Gopal in a reference to past, explores the notion that the past can never be escaped. How the past has been moulded to suit the present throws light on the idea of ‘oneself’. In nutshell, the individual grasps how the ‘self’ reciprocates with understanding to its past. This individualistic nature to see everything in the light of one’s own interpretation, shapes the past according to his/her convenience. It leaves behind certain factors, which could otherwise be seen as dark and obstructing to the present. For Deshpande, this very past which appeared to be so over powering then, is received well now, when pondered over once again through the process of one’s purgation.

Regardless of whether we are resisting it, reliving it, ignoring it, or trying to recreate it-all these things often at the same time- we are always in some way, trying to reshape it to our desires. Therefore, this idea of ‘oneself’ is, actually, what we want ourselves to be. (100)

Gopal expresses the profound truth in his process of self realization. In his view, the illusory life seemingly draws the curtains which masques reality neatly. When this mask falls, and the individual comes in contact with the real world that offers no solace, the man paradoxically, turns to his inner world, to face the external circumstances.

We bury our fears deep, we stamp hard on the earth, we build our lives on this solid, hard foundation, but suddenly the fears come to life, and the earth shakes with their struggle to surface. (51)

When Aru goes to meet her father, to confront him for the injustice which is meted out to their family, and to Sumi in specific, Gopal isn’t able to justify his stand. Both fail to
communicate to one another, but Gopal confesses that he held a fear within. He had experienced the emptiness which was sprouting within him, and felt it should not, in any manner, be a hindrance in reaching out to his family and its responsibilities. This fear lay submerged for a while when Gopal was involved with his wife and children. “I was frightened, Aru, frightened of the emptiness within me, I was frightened of what I could do to us, to all of you, with that emptiness inside me…. ” (51) Gopal is overburdened in the process of ‘self critiquing’, which has resulted in the loss of self respect for him and the family people as well. But contrastingly, Sumi pushes through the image of an unsuccessful wife to identify solace and optimism in her new life to support others. Every day humans struggle. They struggle with their independence, the burden of their responsibility, of freedom, of choice. In the article “Meaningful Meaninglessness: Albert Camus’ Presentation of Absurdism as a Fondation of Goodness”, by Maria K. Genovese articulates a strong view in this regard, “Humans struggle together, and out of their constant and common struggle, out of informed, life -affirming rebellion against failing social constructs, grows positive change.” (12)

Deshpande’s novel A Matter of Time brings particularly “marriage” to be scrutinized from a different angle. How does it crush the individual’s desire and freedom and make people aliens to themselves. This socially accepted and sacred institution becomes a significant platform to address the absurdity embedded in it.

Traditionally, marriage is considered to be the “sole means of support and the sole justification.” (Beauvoir 449) It is upheld as an institution wherein the absolutes could thrive. But the absurd world doesn’t provide any space for the perfect happiness to breed. So, Deshpande through the predicament of a bereaved marriage, abandoned wife and
children showcases the vicious side of marriage, which stays hidden because of its illusory impression. Hence, the ultimate aim is to identify the odds which are pertinent in it as a social institution. At the same time, it also works to give an individual the best amidst the dark, estranged and hostile environments.

Existence is strange and beautiful. Every day new possibilities arise; a flower blooms, two people meet, a play is performed. Every day, every moment, everything wavers between sameness and change, life and death, unity and fragmentation. (Genovese 13)

Sumi identifies a meaning for herself, but by the time she identifies her true worth, she and Shripati meet with an unfortunate death. This death happens when Sumi is clear with her conscience and has achieved a meaning for herself. Sumi gets a job and decides to go to Devgiri. Aru is shattered when she comes to know about it, but Sumi says, “Be happy for me, Aru. This is the first thing in my life I think that I’ve got for myself.” (Deshpande 230) Aru also establishes a sense of purpose through love and hope, partially through Rohit, who lends her a companionship in the future walks of life.

Towards the end, when Gopal comes home to lend a shoulder to his dead wife and also to her father, he is intrigued by the thoughts:

If it is indeed true that we are bound to our destinies, that there is no point struggling against them, even then this remains—that we do not submit passively or cravenly but with dignity and strength. Surely this, to some extent, frees us from our bonds? (246)

An active struggle against the premonitions which hold back from giving the best in the face of adversity, would mark the absurd heroines as victims during the phase of their absurdist struggle. Here, Deshpande’s characters come close to Camus’ heroes, as Camus quotes in The Myth of Sisyphus, “The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” (111)
The novel exhibits the spirit of revolt, a psychological one, against the forces which pull Sumi back to proceed with the life that the fate has chosen for her. The revolt establishes her identity and imparts a sense of achievement, be it for a while, to carry forward with life and accept its bleak stature. At the end, though Sumi meets with death, she does not leave behind teary eyed Aru and Kalyani. On the contrary, both of them hold on with vigour to face life with a hope of betterment. The characters do not withdraw into passive submission, but instead their active involvement to hold life lends a space for their individuality to grow.

Next novel *Shadow Play*, published in the year 2013, is a sequel to Deshpande’s *A Matter of Time*. The novel takes up from a point wherein the entwined stories come to an illusory end. The novel begins with the wedding of Aru and Rohit, which is an unusual wedding, a quiet event, happening at home. Aru is the pivotal character around whom the events in the novel revolve. Shashi Deshpande divides the novel into four sections: The Wedding, the Home, the World and the Crystal Ball. The events which follow up in the form of one’s day to day experiences, shape or perhaps nourish the character’s inner psyche as well. The second part of the novel that falls under the heading ‘Home’ named Vishwas, features a new renovated home with new inhabitants, yet bearing the old nomenclature. The third part, called the ‘World’, reflects how the happenings around like, terrorism for example tends to influence upon the lives of certain individuals directly or indirectly. In fact, the events in Aru’s life, her barreness with no child, the loss of her mother and her grandmother, the abandonement by her father, her inability to conceive, and all other such experiences constitute the mental frame through which she would perceive the world. Thus, her experiences help her in shaping her ‘self’. It exhibits how
outer lives influence a lot in shaping up the inner lives of individuals. Both the lives go simultaneously and one, in any case, is not devoid of the other.

By presenting two parallel realms, the writer draws our attention to the idea that, primarily, it is the outward experiences which make an individual grasp the weariness of the world and the monotone of its activities. “I got an inkling of what faith is: a magic mantra, an open sesame which unlocks the door, if not to understanding the world, at least to accepting and absorbing it.”(56) Through acceptance and absorption, the absurd world exposes its illusory traits. In the novel, there has been a grave effort to understand how Aru as an individual posits her personal choice amidst the myriad relations which surround her. In the ‘Introduction’ to the novel, it is observed:

In Shadow Play, one of India’s most respected and accomplished novelists has produced a work that is deeply humane and contemplative- as much about the ephemeral nature of humane life as it is about the enduring relationships that give it meaning. (Introduction, emphasis mine)

The world becomes the backdrop against which the plotline that reveals the bonding between the women in the family is made known. However, every character weaves an independent story for her own self. The ‘self’ battles numerous internal dilemmas and yet it confronts the absurdity of lives with resilience and courage. At the same time, they remain a part of their family world. It uplifts one’s stature as a responsible individual.

Moments of happiness, moments never to be forgotten. Magic moments, which travel with us and stay with us all our lives, illuminating even our darkest days. The right time, perhaps, to leave the family to themselves at this ephemeral moment of celebration, of happiness and togetherness. (Deshpande 297)

Camus in his book The Myth of Sisyphus and the Other Essays entails that the individuals possess the rights between the want for all or nothing. The individual paves a
The want for all would remain an unquenched desire and the want for nothing would make an individual unfit to be a part of the absurd world. The ‘nothing’ in this regard implies the individual’s inability to identify the essence in one’s existence.

The existentialist, however, differs with the Thomist in respect of his view about ‘essence’. For him, the essence is never created by God, it is made up by the person concerned. Every individual man makes up for himself his own essence by a conscious, self-devised effort; and in so doing he becomes conscious that he exists. (Bhattacharyya 16)

For being a part of Camus’ world, one needs to recognize the only meaning in this life which has been assigned to one. This life is the field of operation, beyond which nothing has relevance. It is the new world which closes doors upon the illusory world, and throws light on the reality within. Quite contrastingly, the same world, through its immobile and still response to the flurry of unsettled questions within an individual, portrays the arena of absurdity which, in turn, marks the freedom of the individual.

I tell you, tomorrow you will be mobilized. For you and for me that is a liberation. The individual can do nothing and yet he can do everything. In that wonderful unattached state you understand why I exalt and crush him at one and the same time. It is the world that pulverizes him and I who liberate him. I provide him with all my rights. (Camus 81)

Reflecting the same sentiment, Aru struggles with herself to come to terms with the reality that she cannot bear a child. This inability makes her feel incomplete and consider that it makes a joke of the sexual act as well. For Aru, the fact of unchangingness frightens her. In life as well, to the extent an individual is able to find a sense for oneself in any physical activity or mechanical work, there lies a consolation to understand living. This unchangingness is what Camus calls an encounter with the absurd. “For me the sole datum is the absurd. The first and, after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to
preserve the very thing that crushes me, consequently to respect what I consider essential in it. I have just defined it as a confrontation and an unceasing struggle.” (Camus 34) So what remains to be grasped from a situation of this kind, is the acceptance of an unchanging world imbued with the awareness of the same. The need of the hour is to hold this sense of being crushed and yet remain involved in the struggle to keep this uncertainty alive.

The novel also highlights the bond among the sisters; Charu and Seema, who become close to Aru after the death of their mother and the abandonement by their father. Aru and Charu shared a more friendly relationship, but Seema who was quite younger to them, was mainly brought up by Kalyani, her grandmother. Kalyani had an estranged relationship with her husband Shripati. She had lost both her daughter and her husband in an accident. During the battling phase of cancer, she finds her pursuit coming to a close, by being able to shower her love upon her grand daughter, Seema. In fact, she takes an assurance from Gopal to be always there as a backbone for their family and never to walk away from them.

The truth is that it is only hope, hope even more than love, which can lighten the burden of parentage, it is hope, much more than love, which makes it possible for us to live, to go on living. (303)

For Deshpande, ‘Hope’, in this sense, is not a belief of anything beyond this world. Rather the future could be re-moulded to one’s own liking. Having grasped the sense:

It amazes me that we put our faith in life after death, that we believe in Paradise and Heaven. I have to admire the human imagination which has created these, the optimism that promises happiness even after life is over. But, of course, the future is always malleable; we can shape it to our desires and our dreams. (116)
For Camus, the idea of ‘hope’ does not exceed beyond the immediate present. For him, the hope is in sustaining and living the present. In his opinion, it lies in whatsoever little one can experience as “optimism without hope”. The fact of facing odds with a sense of this positivity suffices Camus. He makes ‘hope’ synonymous with the urge to make a meaningful present. In other words, “positive nihilism” means, carving one’s own sense of survival amidst the rampant negativity around. The idea of clinging on to optimism in the present implies success to the characters, who have had the vigour in themselves to stand upright despite all odds. Each in one’s own way is a prince without a kingdom, despite “having the advantage of knowing that all kingdoms are illusory”. They are the “men who have given up all hope” and who are endowed with “a lucid indifference.” (Camus 69)

In Deshpande’s novels, the readers are given a choice to imagine the life of her characters beyond the last page. This doesn’t make it similar to the endings of fairy tales, ‘and then they lived happily forever.’ The readers are left to imagine an end wherein the imperfections are accepted and ‘living’ is sorted out with better reception after the process of purgation. Deshpande takes Camus’ optimism one step forward in visualizing the idea of hope in the futuristic sense. She instills immense will power in her characters that they become ‘Masters’ of their own making, rather than succumbing to the dictates of destiny and society. Here ‘Hope’ for Deshpande, slightly unlike Camus, communicates that one positive zeal would be in the urge for fulfillment of their own stature in building a better present with the refined perception of their conception of themselves. “Gopal has always believed that it is the human will, which shapes human lives. The idea that we come into life carrying our irremediable destinies with us or everything flows from an unseen power, seems strange to him.” (Deshpande
141) The matter of choice is a grave concern in this respect. Deshpande doesn’t believe in fate being drawn by an unseen force. Quite resembling Camus, she believes in the importance of ‘Human Will’ to draw on life. Though Sisyphus was condemned by God to a life of fate, yet his scorn and hatred for death and, lastly, his passion for life gave him the penalty to pursue nothing within nothingness. “At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.” (Camus 109)

It is the self analysis which reveals truth to Gopal. He realizes that though there could be many escapes, which could help withdraw from the wretchedness for a while, yet the self would be a lone companion for the solitary walker on the path to decipher one’s true identity in the dark, lonesome, unfathomable world.

For, if it is the same self, the soul or the atman or whatever we call it, that takes rebirth, it means that we cannot escape our selves. It seems like a nightmare to me, the thought of going through this whole exercise we call life over and over again. And if all these lives are the rungs of a ladder leading us to moksha, how shall we ever climb the rungs if we are chained to ourselves? (116)

These life rungs construct the ladder and lead to ultimate deliverance. Deshpande identifies her characters in adhering sincerely to each rung of life, to remain in the world however absurd it may appear. Their struggle is to achieve ‘Moksha’ in a very different sense. She doesn’t see her characters bonded in the predicament of living, instead she finds them as tangible individuals born to serve with justice every rung of the ladder, and at the same time, not forgetting their very internal self that is contributory to every rung of the ladder.
Shadow Play has the themes of terrorism and rape intertwined with the broad conception of absurdity existent in the world around. Tressa and Seema become the victims of the same respectively. Tressa, who works with Aru, is killed in the terrorist attack and her colleagues, Aru, Nagma and Surekha offer her shoulder for consolance. Seema is surrounded by her family and friends to uplift her morale from the trauma she has been through. Here, the novel showcases the idea of ‘need’ in terms of human life. Kasturi is a tenant at Seema’s house. She builds a relationship with Mira, whose sister helps Seema to go abroad. Kasturi finds her support in Mira. “But the greatest luck in life has been having Mira as a friend. She can’t imagine life without Mira- soul sister, mother confessor, guardian angel.” (Deshpande 125)

Through the thick bond of relations, humans feel responsible for themselves in a world, where situations seem absurd and nothing is considered significant. Perhaps, it is in catering to our true self amidst the relative selves, and make others also realize the same. Here may lie the purpose of life. The importance of any human living is identified within this relational network and how one may encounter the absurdity is in fact quite unpredictable.

Human relationships, she is now convinced, are so complex, the variations in human behaviour so myriad, humans so skilful in devising new forms of cruelty, that it is impossible for statutes to provide for every single contingency. (82)

So, there is no single solution for human existentialist predicament. Every individual is required to undergo and battle against it in one’s own terms.

In the third novel, Moving On published in the year 2004, Deshpande delineates the sense of alienation again within the confines of one’s own family. Interestingly, Family is
generally considered as a social system wherein there appears no place for alienation. The novel narrates the story of Manjari and of Baba. The tale revolves around, on the one hand, the childhood of Manjari along with her parents and her sister and, on the other hand, her short lived life with Shyam and her present with Raja and her children. Alongside, she fathoms the unique relation which Baba shares with Vasu. The novel is mainly about understanding two different individuals through their own personal narratives which differ in their outlook towards the past. Both of them grasp life and its dilemmas which help them understand the true self that stayed hidden in ‘being in the world’. Yet, skillfully following the plotline, Deshpande reveals the past and the influence of the past upon the present in the life of Manjari. The two fragments of time, her past that conceals her ‘strange’ relationship with her parents and their individual quest as well and her present that has a life experience wrought with disorientation are interlinked. Choosing one of the most significant existentialist themes, i.e. alienation, the author emphasizes the importance of realising human living amidst the broad connections of family. It is a story that begins with Manjari coming across the Diary of her father and realizes the need to know her parents. This is not to seek a revelation of them as they were a husband and a wife, but in understanding Baba and Mai as ‘individuals’, having their singular identities. Baba in his diary writes about his grandfather, an orthodox man, who had led “a life of lordly inactivity”, and continues to write about his father, a man who followed the principles of Gandhiji. Twice married, Baba’s father had two children, Badri and Gayatri. Gayatri got married to one distant relative RK, but didn’t have any child. She soon became a widow. But Badri, called Baba in the novel, marries Vasu. Baba is fascinated by the finesse of the human body. He has two children, Manjari and
Malu. Manjari’s present exposes her as a rebel daughter, who is thrown off the track on account of many problems. It is the inner struggle of Manjari to combat with the nostalgia of the past with the present reality, that leads to traverse through deeply statured emotional landscapes. Manjari recalls having no significant identity of her own till her younger sister Malu is born. It is only then she gets the title jiji. Manjari mentions that it was quite easy for Malu to be loved and receive attention. But, in the case of Manjari, she always had to put some extra in to receive the same. Manjari became the thread that kept the four together. She could not imagine of an existence without her parents and sister. It was always “Baba -Mai-Malu and I”. (Deshpande 41) That is why, when the all so appealing and pleasing Manjari went against her parents and fell in love with Shyam, people were rather stunned to see the independence and audacity of Manjari that hadn’t revealed till then. “From where had this woman come? Had she been there all the while, concealed behind the so-eager-to-please-jiji? And now this ready-for-violence person…” (Deshpande 142) Manjari had to discontinue her education in order to marry Shyam, which her father wasn’t in favour of. Yet she fights against all odds and marries Shyam and their marriage reaps into her widowhood within three years of its execution. Through Manjari, one comes to know about the three phases of her life. Firstly, she talks of her relationship with the family, her parents and her sister. The second phase is her marriage to Shyam. She gives birth to a son, Anand and also takes up the responsibility of Sachi, Malu’s child. In the third phase, that is the present, she finds her physical satiation through Raman and also is conscious of the advances of Raja towards her. Through Raman she executes a physical rebellion and by denying marriage to Raja, she comprehends that the loneliness and alienation, which she has experienced in her family
and marriage, can be resolved only by an adherence to the self. The first step towards this second rebellion is that she learns driving and equips herself in a manner that she isn’t dependent on anyone. Manjari appears confident and is instilled with a clarity. She demonstrates how the physical incidents have groomed her personality. The nourishment of her soul which has been wrecked by hostile circumstances, divulges that perhaps the sense of satiation does not rest on other relations but on an intricate relation within.

Thus, it is only the acquired consciousness of one’s being entrapped in the uninvited situations. The absolute freedom is only a remote possibility. It comes enveloped in despair. The final lines of the novel gives the crux explaining the pursuit of the humanity in general:

   The search is doomed to failure.’ Yes, Baba, you’re right, we will never find what we are looking for, we will never get what we’re seeking for in other humans. We will continue to be incomplete, ampersands all of us. Yet, the search is what it’s all about, don’t you see, Baba, the search is the thing. (Deshpande 343)

The above statement clearly evinces the predicament of an absurdist world. The uncertainty of the world represents the quest of each individual who is identified as the absurd hero. The individual sets off to identify the meaning and purpose that underlies any human activity. In the manner Sisyphus is summoned to the task from which there could be no redemption, all individuals do engage with life to imagine one happy like Sisyphus. Thus, the search itself would lend a satisfaction, which could sustain in itself, and provides a purpose to the mechanical human living.

Exploring the ground of human relationships, Deshpande identifies the ignorance which one possesses towards one’s very own living. Human beings are a universe of their own and they are engraved with a sense of reasoning, to pursue the quest for their existence.
Individuals could be the sole beings responsible in identifying their stance in this limitless and unfathomable universe. “Yet the enigma of our selves remain unfathomable. The ego, the libido, the unconscious…how little they explain! Such tiny dots on vast uncharted map. The truth is that each one of us is a universe more complicated than the limitless we inhibit.” (Deshpande111) The statement underscores the ideology of Camus’ philosophy that the individual, who embarks on a quest of this kind, is the absurd hero. The pursuit is to recognize the best one could reveal of oneself when confronted with a world which that be understood in totality.

Manjari, battles with a deep inner dilemma, which she overcomes partially through being a rebel and rest by accepting positively the absurdity of her circumstances. Perhaps, for Deshpande, human relationships at the familial level tend to expose the higher level of truth, as presumed in general. The novel projects Manjari as a complex woman battling her way into living to reach out to her real self through the tumultuous demands and responsibilities in her life. Through the emotional wounds, intrusions, dissention, domination and violations within the family or at domestic space, the author mirrors the social vagaries, always fraught with disjunctive and alienating potentials for individuals. The plot delves deep into the relationship between Shyam and Manjari. It stemmed initially from the physical or bodily identification. Before, they could fall in love with one another, they identified deep comfort in their physical contact with one another. In the words of Binod Mishra:

Manjari- Shyam relationship is based on the foundations of the body …..Their union was the union of two hungry bodies and it had too little scope of any discussion, say even wooing.(63)
Marriage, a social institution, also surfaces with a sense of ‘absurdity’ inherent in it. Confined to its temporal limits, it brings forth the existentialist pang and breaks free from the accepted norms or perhaps hyped notions on the same. The inner dilemma develops when Manjari forces herself to seal her sexual desires after the death of her husband, exhibiting a sense of loyalty towards him. But, on the contrary, she experiences an urge when encountered the touch of her house tenant, Raman. This pushes open all her unexpressed desires and she releases her suppressed emotions by involving in a physical relation with Raman. At this juncture, the notion of loyalty may appear absurd. Writers like Beauvoir impel women to achieve autonomy to discover and nurture their authentic self through lived experience of self realization. David Sheerman affirms by expressing, “It is only by immersing ourselves in our lives that we might find meaning, and then only within them, for it is only within our lives that meaning might be generated.”(278) Manjari identifies the absurd in her, when she is in total confrontation with her inner dilemma. Her marriage to Shyam, which she fetched through rebellion by holding an opinion that marriage could dissolve all her unanswered questions, falls apart. It, on the contrary, creates a void in her heart, even in the presence of Shyam as well. Shyam, at one juncture is disloyal to his wife and impregnates her sister, Malu, who dies during child birth. Unable to bear the guilt which he undergoes, he commits suicide, an escape into a world of transcendence, failing to stand by Camus’ ideology. On the other hand, his wife Manjari, having lost her sister, her husband, and the support of her mother, still stands up to the absurd which was manifested in the loveless marriage. It was purely built on the illusory bodily attraction. Manjari, here is in similar lines with the hero of The Stranger Mersault, who lives in the world through acceptance and self realization.
Every life, she seems to be telling us, has its own meaning and in the general bleakness, this itself becomes a source of strength. That life is not only a parade of colours and sounding of distant trumpets, as the more flamboyant storyteller has told us, but an examination of the way in which people get on with their lives, one step at a time. (Geeta 1)

Manjari wrestles with the absurd at the emotional level. She is confused when she realizes the way in which her body responded to the touch of Raman. It is incomprehensible for her that she has been invaded by a stranger yet how subtly her physical body responded to the inner urge. Though, Deshpande terms this relationship as an adulterous one, yet she traverses the grey line to project certain responses of the self. All human actions cannot be thrusted under one umbrella. Manjari gives her justification:

I don’t want to hear his voice either. Only the body, his body, only my body, my starved body. No thoughts, no feelings, only sensation. The smell of sundried clothes, of sweat, the hardness, the pressure of his body, it’s weight on mine and my body responding, welcoming his. (Deshpande 257)

The absurdity, which gives her a sense of incompleteness within herself after the death of Shyam, is rebelliously encountered. Manjari experiences extreme loneliness in her life after the death of her husband and her sister. She is left to herself to make sense of the world and her own sexuality. She defies her vulnerability through boldness and defiance.

In the words of Chanchala K. Naik:

In probing into the complex relationship within the family, Deshpande weaves her narrative around multiple acts of transgression while bringing into contestation self/other, man/woman, bone/body, physical/emotional, sexual/ethical, individual/social binaries. (247)

Baba expresses his views in the diary. He writes:

…how do we live knowing the fact of total extinction? Knowing the randomness of our existence, of its finiteness, how do we convince ourselves of its significance? Does the solution lie in accepting the fact, in
embracing it and making it then of no account? In knowing that there is no cure, no drug to alleviate the disease? (Deshpande 15)

The challenge for the absurd hero/ine is to establish a sense of significance to one’s existence in the world which isn’t conveniently adaptable to human needs. Instead, it makes the individuals to tune their living with its absurdity. As Camus puts forth in the beginning of his book, The Myth of Sisyphus, “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”(11) The absurd here is a disease without a cure. The pursuit here is to keep the sense of the absurd ‘Alive’, and not to build any escape to get rid of this impending doom. The absurd world gives rise to its individual, who is as ephemeral as the world that they have to break free, to arrive at this juncture. According to Camus, it is only individuals who can build an epiphanic moment in their ephemeral living. It is a solitary journey of every individual to fathom a purpose which is individualistic to the person concerned and the experiences would vary with every other individual. As Baba mentions, “We can never be replaced. It seems to me this is the price we pay for our more evolved state: we are the true ephemera of the universe.”(Deshpande 15)

Life’s subtlest revelations come through Baba’s diary. Baba within himself is a rebel like his own father. His father went against the ideals of their family by adhering to Gandhian principles and by getting married to a Harijan, first time in the family history. The first wife died and his father, again married a girl who was a manglik. The rebellion is traced in Baba who married Mai, a woman of low caste. It is his revolt against the set of rules which couldn’t be functionary or which within its own system appear absurd. These abstractions lose their form once removed from their territory.
I have thought much of our fumbling attempts to come to terms with the idea of mortality. Heaven, paradise, another life, children work, goodness-so many drugs to counter that terrible disease. All mere placebos. And yet, we live as if our existence is endless, as if it matters, as if the ‘I’ is of infinite significance. (Deshpande 23)

Baba’s expressions gain profundity towards the end of his life, when he himself wishes to identify the nuances of his life to understand as it swept past him. And the ultimate focus lies in the pursuit “There has to be some passion in life, otherwise life becomes humdrum.” (Deshpande 9) Sisyphus embarks to push the stone uphill carrying the thought within that there lies meaning in meaninglessness and his existence is proved by pursuing the task of rolling the stone. “The first time I was pulled out of it, rent away from it and pushed into the world outside is a moment I still remember, a moment of sheer absolute terror.” (Deshpande 87) This is the general response of any individual who experiences the strike of the absurd at any moment of time. Individuals are pulled out from deep familiarity to strangeness and hollowness.

“We created God to embody the idea of a ‘self’ that is complete in itself. This is the harmony that the astronomers of old dreamt of. To achieve this wholeness is the final stage of evolution, it is nirvana. But for us, who are only a part of that wholeness, it is unattainable.” (Deshpande 336) In the absurd world, God is dead. God, in the language of Camus, implies a sense of completeness which cannot be fetched in this universe. The search for completion remains as a quest, which could keep an individual alive. Baba in his opinion about life reveals, “The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death.” (Deshpande 245) The latter is an inevitable choice, yet the former exposition moves us on to experience and receive the wholesomeness of life.
Strangers to Ourselves, a recent novel by Shashi Deshpande, published in the year 2015, again explores the mystery of human relationships through a complex plot line. It serves to be quite closer to the existentialist line of thought that she pursues significantly in her novels apart from depicting other standpoints. The novel dwells on the human emotion of love and the thin line of purpose and trust which sums up every relation. She introduces the woman protagonist, Aparna, an oncologist by profession who falls in love with Shri Hari Pandit, who happens to be an aspiring singer. The novel traces how Aparna, who has already had a failure in marital life, regains her hope, love, meaning and trust through Shri Hari. Apart from this, she achieves better clarity about her father and is able to forgive him, when she realises that Mr. Dandekar was the sole reason of joy and living, for her great grandmother, Ahalya. The novel takes up many themes one after the other, which in turn help the readers witness the predicament of human survival. It helps to unravel the meaning and purpose of human existence, within the confines of the given time period of life and its inescapable forces. “A great imaginative effort has been made to put into fiction situations and plots which do not simply deal with some universal human trait but are meant to express universal truth about man’s situation in the world.”(Cruickshank 164)

Deshpande has shown the importance of the philosophical outlook which governs human life. She begins the novel with a deep insight that runs through life experiences. She recognizes two fundamental desires that mark human actions. Generally speaking, the two pivotal goals, an individual is engaged in is a place for one’s own and the desire for progeny. Quite in line to the existentialist notion, the writer brings out the fact that, it takes one epiphanic moment to accept the ephemeral characteristic of our living. This
indefinite moment, which could make itself presentable at any one abrupt moment of time, becomes the absurd. The two desires clash and it results in the search to meet up with the individual’s sense of loneliness in this strange and unknown world. The vast world makes an individual feel lonely and thus, the person is always in search for a companion who can fulfill the emptiness which is a part of the absurd world. Deshpande mentions in the prologue to her novel *Strangers to Ourselves* that once the umbilical cord is cut, the individual feels a sense of loss, as if being alienated in a new and vast land. “The unbearable loneliness of a human being, and the growing knowledge that we are incomplete in ourselves, often makes the search end in person rather than a place.”(1) Deshpande addresses the predicament of loneliness to live in a world, which is devoid of all meaning and thus lends an insight to understand human emotions. Emotions like love dissolves the strangeness associated with the absurd world. In fact, quite aesthetically, she redirects this loneliness towards an optimism. The search for “a place of one’s own”(Deshpande 1) ends up in something more profound, that is, looking for a person. The quest manifests in love and ends in progeny. The desire for progeny masques the frame of the limited period of life. It gives the individual to hold an illusory refuge against the idea of mortal consciousness, which could assert within at one epiphanic point of time. “Battling with the fearful truth of human mortality, with the transience of human life, we look for immortality through our children; to have children is to be part of the infinite chain of humanity.”(1) The writer’s immense stress on the search for a person in a world devoid of any light through love becomes a stark illustration of the re-defined existentialist outlook. This shift in the search from space to a person symbolizes the need to move for answers from the exterior front to the self within. In the post modern world,
especially for the existentialists, all that the world could offer is its silence. The search for something that one can call as one’s own, which in itself is an illusion, seems like a meaningless pursuit. It is here, the writer introduces the concept of love. Love, which arises from the need to fill the emptiness and is a consequence of identifying the lack of meaning, underlies all existence. The only truth which can persist is in accepting the illusions which surround one and yet paving a path for purpose within the confines of the same. Truth here can be viewed as a revelation in accepting the stark and naked world, with the curtain raised up. It grasps the fierce understanding that truth exists in hope of immediate deeds and nothing futuristic beyond the present.

The prologue to her novel *Strangers to Ourselves* identifies the ephemeral lives of individuals and a quest to decipher the ultimate meaning which rests at all living. Through this prologue, she establishes the significance of the title of the novel. This hostile and dark world, which amazes people with its new and unknown characteristics in its own ways, also marks people as strangers to their very own selves. “I will be comfortable here, she thinks, but has a pang, wondering whether all her life she will live like this, in homes that belong to others, among the possession of strangers. The one place she remembers as a home was in Chandrapur.” (33) Through this, the writer places the predicament of an individual quite explicitly. The search for a place of one’s own does not provide a solace against the uncertainty of the world. When Taimavshi and Madhu help Aparna to settle down at her new home and later they leave, she feels happy to be left to herself, but somehow the physical sense of having been settled does not seep into her. It does not provide her the sense of recognition of being connected to her very self. The physical displacement from the old to the new might have created little bit of
tussle for her. However, when she is all settled at her new home, she still feels an
estrangement within. The idea of a space, which an individual can call it to be one’s own
in this vast strange world is destroyed. The external space fails to provide any solace to
an individual and, the person turns within for the answers. The search for a space shifts to
the search for a person who could instill a sense of completeness by fulfilling the
emptiness of the heart. This contrast of opinions results in the identification of the absurd
by Aparna, who witnesses a new dilemma within her. “The way to live with the absurd
on the verge of the abyss is not to seek external salvation but to turn to self-creation or
creation in general.”(Golomb 124)

Aparna is a professionally sound and financially independent woman. She emerges quite
successful in her field. Her problem turns up when she realizes that the home where she
has been residing, is to be handed over to the landlord, who would be returning from the
US. All events get a new direction, when she meets Jyoti as her patient. Jyoti is battling
with cancer, yet holds a serene and unperturbed attitude towards life. Despite having
realized the dangerous implications of the disease, her revolt against the present day
predicament lies in the knowledge of the disease in general. “ And I’ve understood this
much, that this a conflict in my body between the bad cells and the good cells. It’s like all
the fairy tales, all the stories in myths and fables- a battle between good and evil.” (73)
Jyoti is aware of the truth that her stand is unlike as it is so in the fairy tales, of the good
winning over the evil. She is conscious of the ultimate loss at the end of her disease, yet
she identifies a better person in herself and lives her life with immense consciousness of
the available limited time frame. The awareness of the disease and a need to live life
completely, before the body succumbs to death gives her a sense of meaning inherent in
her life. Jyoti, in Camus lines, marks a judicious living of the Absurd. “Camus believed that, despite the limitations in perspective and the absurdity of life, humans can make decisions that lead to less suffering. This is not the eradication of evil…it is instead the work of humans to reduce suffering when they can, to act with the acceptance that all cannot be healed, resolved, or explained on this earth.”( White 557) Jyoti could be placed in parallel lines with Rieux and Tarrou in Camus’ *The Plague*. Both the characters seek for a meaning in the most hostile of situations, wherein their lives are put at stake. Rieux, a doctor by profession, despite the awareness that the Plague could never be eradicated, continues his job to save the patients afflicted with the disease. Similarly, Tarrou joins social service to contribute in cleaning up the casualties caused by the Plague. Tarrou’s fight against the Plague and also against his own death is symbolic of his struggle against the uncertainty seized by the existence. Both of Camus’ characters represent the individuals who recognize their position in a world full of odds and attain it through mere action.

Jyoti does not evade the inevitable, which lies in death, and builds a living which is significant. “The difference between knowing and not-knowing is the biggest difference there is in the world. The way I thought about my life before I was told I had cancer and the way I think of it now- there’s no comparison! Once the knowledge enters you, it becomes a part of you.”(74) The knowledge of the disease could be compared to the situation of the absurdity. Once the ephemeral yet epiphanic revelation of the absurd happens, an individual possesses a more sincere outlook towards life. “The absurd is made to live rather by self-commitment of one’s historical situation, provided that one recognizes the ultimate equivalence of all actions, rather than by withdrawing, so far as
this is possible, from all self commitment.”(100) One’s outlook towards life would be based on identifying this grave thought that is bent upon to fathom the meaning of life. It does not rely upon an entity which is way beyond our limits, and rests upon false hope. Rather, it lies in realizing the nuances of the absurd world and identifying a meaning in the present, without creating an escape in death or beyond. “Yes, man is his own end. And he is his only end. If he aims to be something, it is in this life. Now I know it only too well. Conquerors sometimes talk of vanquishing and overcoming. But it is always “overcoming oneself” that they mean.” (Camus 82) The knowledge of the disease creates a sense of awakening from the slumber. This awakening poses two options. One is suicide and the other is recovery. Camus wards off suicide as an escape, and adheres to the future functioning in recovery, which is to understand an irreconcilable universe and master a better living.

The novel is a revelation of the self to Aparna. She battles against her inner dilemmas to recognize her true passion and essence of living. It lies in her indecisiveness whether to fall or not to fall once again in love, especially when she has already been once deceived by the marriage. When Aparna witnesses the disturbed marital life of her parents, who were ideal parents, atleast according to her, she feels bereft of the significance of love in order to nurture relationships. Aparna’s father happened to be a Marathi dramatist, and spent most of his time in rendering his contribution to the Marathi theatre. Her mother was a working woman, yet took equal effort in contributing to the family as well. She was the one who wrote down her husband’s plays in a legible writing and created for him an ambience at home in which he could pursue his passion without hindrance. A person like her mother, who made herself
available at work and home, was betrayed when her husband fell for another woman, for no valid reason.

Nature has not been kind to men. They have to carry the yoke of their libido almost all their lives. And a man’s libido is very strong. At times it becomes so loud that it drowns out a whole orchestra of emotions. What remains is only that one tune, that one instrument. (Deshpande 145)

The things which followed up weren’t quite smooth. Her mother shifted to Bombay, to an apartment near her sister’s home. She was diagnosed with cancer and eventually passed away. After that her father cut ties with everybody and became a shabby old man, quite contrary to the acclaim earned through his contribution to the Marathi theatre. Love snapped the idea of a happy family for Aparna. Mr. Dandekar’s falling for a woman and the pathetic closure brought about by Aparna’s love towards her family, made her turn her back on this chapter of life. Aparna becomes oblivious of the fact that love could ever seal the emptiness or void caused by the course of events.

While searching for a new home, Aparna meets Jyoti and Shri Hari Pandit, who break her free from the monotony of life and help her view life through new lens. Jyoti, in one manner, gives back Aparna her father and Shri Hari Pandit instills the aroma of lost love in her heart. Still, having been a witness to the mishap of relationships at home, she was in desperate need to fill the cracks of the disturbed life. The vulnerability within her made her accept fleeting love in her senior, whom she happened to meet abroad and never knew that ‘the once upon a time college crush’ could be her life partner as well. Faster this love came across, sooner it drilled a deep hole of loneliness. By undergoing an abortion, she altogether shut the ray of hope out that could have bridged the gap in their relation. With all these physical happenings, which became a part of Aparna’s life, she
closed all the doors of recovery. Shree Hari made her change her thinking drawing back from the external space to the internal space.

Initially, she felt about herself as a desperate woman in want of a touch. But later, she could no longer ward off the necessity of Shree Hari Pandit’s presence in her life. “She is reluctant for him to go, but she wants to be on her own, to think of what is happening to her, what she is doing, what she is getting into. She had learnt to do without love, men and all that, but this man…?” (Deshpande 42) This craving is demonstrated through the music of Hari, which she got introduced first at a *Baithak* in Dr. Bhagat’s home. Music is introduced here as a motif which brings to forefront certain emotions that had been laid to rest for long. The music of Hari reminds Aparna of her father, two men in her life, who bring back the lost love in her life. “When it rises, it seems to her he is pouring its richness and purity into her emptiness. She makes a small sound, an exclamation of pleasure; a Joyfulness pervades her… He sings this with emotion, but her inner being, like a taut string, is still throbbing to the earlier piece.” (4) The song fills up all the hollowness in her life.

The universe constructs events beautifully in a manner that Aparna juxtaposes her past with the present happening. Hari being a part of the drama, which was written by Mr. Dandekar, and Aparna being mesmerized with his voice and remaining oblivious of the fact that the chained doors of love would be thrashed open through the coming of Hari, becomes pivotal in the plot. The novel highlights the dilemma of the ‘within’ for Aparna and shows how when the outer physical world fails to provide answers, breeds the situation of the absurd. Here, one can observe that Shashi Deshpande’s approach towards existentialism takes a practical orientation in visualizing the summation of nothingness in
an individual through love. As she opines in her prologue that, “ all human stories begin with love.” (Deshpande 1) Aparna’s denial for love, which began with her father and later her boyfriend, is resolved through Jyoti and Shree Hari Pandit. The writer draws attention to the deep longing of an individual to find a sense of acquaintance with the outside world through the reins of the inner human emotions.

Jyoti, though came to her as a patient, surprised Aparna with her enormous zeal. When Jyoti decided to take up the task of translating Ahalya’s story, she wished to identify living and the complexities and intricacies associated with it. “If life, survival, matter above all, then death is wrong, it is fearsome. It goes against what I am trying to convince myself about- that death is but one stage in human life, inevitable, not fearful, though unavoidable.”( Deshpande 190)

Deshpande as a writer finds the crux of all human activities in the relationships. As a weaver of complex tale of emotional bonds in this novel, the writer has shown a parallel take on Aparna’s relationship with her father and lover. How both help in sponging off the nothingness in her life, built initially by them. Nothingness in Aparna’s life is fed by her father’s betrayal of her mother and the absence of love in her married life. These two incidents dig a deep hollow and leave an emotional abyss in her. Through Ahalya’s story, Aparna fathoms that it was in Dandekar that her great grand mother found her solace. Though, she could not forgive her father for what he did to his wife, in his last days, yet the other perspective, of he being the sole reason for Ahalya’s pursuit of happiness, makes her get back to the small boy, Dandekar. The, novel entwines the lives of women, who contribute in one or the other way to create a sense of fulfillment. Jyoti owes her survival to her doctor. Aparna initially holds an attitude of patient- doctor relationship to
her. But sooner, this wall collapses and each one becomes supportive to some cause in other’s life. Shree Hari Pandit’s advances astonish Aparna at the start. She is unable to pull the reins of her emotive forces.

She does not realize, or if she does, she puts the thought away, that by letting Hari enter her life and her thoughts, by letting emotions, which she had been so wary of, take her over, she has become 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)

The writer brings out a series of internal rifts within the character of Aparna. The broken marriage wherein she couldn’t fathom love makes her seal all doors of love. The plot sustains a continuous dilemma which appears to have resolved only in the end. The title of the novel also serves as a great testimony in this regard. “Or, perhaps, the truth is that he could not help himself, perhaps it was out of his hands. Does love make us strangers to ourselves so that we don’t understand what we are doing and why? I never imagined I would get into the state I am in now. That I would once again succumb so wholly to my feelings for a man.”(76) Aparna, when she goes through the same kind of predicament in her life, understands the stand of her father, as to how he fell in love with another woman. “She thought she had gone through it once and that it was over for her. That she had acquired immunity, as if love is like the measles. Yet here she is, behaving like an adolescent fool, ready to fall into his arms when she opens the door early in the morning and finds Hari at the door.”(76) Aparna is left confused with her very own self, whether to give in to a choice which would cater to her in a better sense. The writer here, takes a more aesthetic stand by making love as the one humanistic lodging within the heart, which could direct the nothingness and the absurdity experienced by the individual to a
level where, in quite a temporal manner, the person combats against the mortal consciousness and gets the title of a ‘rebel’.

Camus in his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” also directs the unbearable loneliness of a person punished or summoned to an activity which has no absolute meaning, to find solace in the action itself. Deshpande, in the prologue to her novel addresses the significant issue of human bereavement through love. The idea of being left in a world without meaning with the heavy burden of mortal consciousness, to live the adventure within the limited time period life. It is here that the writer gives an optimistic interpretation to the existentialist dilemma of human life. The individual may find meaning in combating the mortality of our lives, through progeny and the idea of being lost all alone in a vast world, through love. The prologue to the novel serves as a testimony in lending a glimpse of the practicality associated with the philosophy of existentialism. Both Aparna and Shree Hari Pandit, find their purpose and meaning for life through their professions. Shree Hari Pandit aims to see himself as an aspiring singer in the years to come. The journey for Shree Hari seems to be a challenging one. Though endowed with immense talent, his field, involves the strife “‘The best time is when you are singing,’ he says. ‘That’s the real thing, that’s the only thing that matters.’”(Deshpande 109) When an individual is deeply engrossed in the task they have been summoned for, the individual might not be able to sense the absurd lurking without as well as within them. Once the mechanical activities fail to strike a chord within, the absurd is born. Camus also identifies the purpose of an individual in one’s attachment to the action which one performs to fetch a purpose for oneself in this lifetime. Hari identifies this through his singing, which has been passed along by his grandfather and
Aparna recognizes it in her profession of being an oncologist. The helplessness which she felt, due to the lack of knowledge when her mother was diagnosed with cancer, made her take up this profession to increase awareness of the disease. Both Aparna and Hari, find a meaning for their living in their profession, in a parallel line to Sisyphus who wards off the futileness of all living through the activity of pushing the stone uphill. In the practical scenario, the mechanical activities in the form of any profession lends one the space to ward off absurdity. The profession despite being repetitive, monotonous lends a sense of purpose on the external front. Aparna being an oncologist, is quite responsible for lending purpose to many lives and Shree Hari lends music a different identity through his singing. “It may be said, and with truth, that thinkers like Sartre and Camus insist strongly on self-commitment and that they by no means strive to withdraw us from social responsibility and activity.”(Copleston 207) Like Camus, Deshpande also lends a definite meaning to the ‘pause’ experienced in life. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, it is love which could seal the lurking absurdity within each person, by combating mortality and letting in a feeling of acceptance what life brings for one.

In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land…freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, what counts is not the best living but the most living.( Camus 13)

Deshpande, takes her readers on a journey which unfolds love, and fills the emptiness and gaps caused by previous wounds.

Hope is another lurking factor around which the existentialist aspects of the novel evolve. Aparna being an oncologist by profession needs to handle the emotional side of the patients, who tend to become pessimistic with the knowledge of the dreadfulness of
The treatment of disease rests on hope. Aparna takes a middle path in convincing her patients to hang on with the treatment. She does not offer extreme assurance of longevity of life nor does she withdraw the passion to live for just a few more months. She adopts an objective purpose, by mechanically talking about only the disease and the kind of the treatment involved. Hope is one illusory invisible lucid sensation which they feel, and can hold on to. Drawing the deadly disease of cancer in an emotive context parallels the onslaught of the epidemic plague in the town of Oran, in Camus’ novel *The Plague*. Rieux, the narrator quite similar to Aparna finds meaning in fighting death at every moment in people’s life. It foreshadows the idea of Revolt. “The universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. “(Camus 111) In Camus’ *The Plague*, the plot line shows the revolt against the epidemic which had handicapped the lives of thousands in the city of Oran, but in reality it has a symbolic meaning to understand the predicament of the human life in general. As the final lines of the novel announce:

> He knew that those jubilant crowds did not know, but could have learnt from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; but it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.(Camus 251-52)

The phenomenon of plague builds a general context to bring out human helplessness in general. But at the same time, it demonstrates the attitude of varied people towards life, marked with the existentialist colour. Dr. Rieux, the doctor who is incharge of looking
over the plague cases understands that things could be different later, but at the present moment what is required is to make the individuals inflicted with plague feel better. “I am involved in a never ending defeat and this does not stop me from engaging in the struggle.”(Camus 63)Secondly, it demonstrates the attitude of the individuals and the general public to an impending doom. Rieux as a doctor, dismisses the plague through his revolt and not by mere submission.

Father Paneloux relates the idea of religious atonement to the epidemic situation of the plague. He says that the plague is the consequence of the sins which the individuals would have committed. This idea is overruled when a young boy aged five, dies because of the plague. Father Paneloux is then questioned as to what sin the boy aged five would have committed. Tragedy befalls upon the Father and, at no point, he submits to the treatment offered by Dr. Rieux. Having clung to a faith beyond the confines of the predicament at hand, Paneloux loses his battle against living in the name of religion, quite unlike Rieux, who keeps his nameless and futile labour continue till the very end. In the similar view, Aparna understands that the fact of a patient done successfully with the chemotherapy is the illusion within which an individual feels the game against death won. Howsoever, death is always lurking somewhere around the corner. As Rieux contemplates on the congruity of life and death when he outpours,“ for the unhappiness and instruction of men, plague will once again wake up its rats and send them to die in the streets of a happy city.’”(9)Death is the stark truth which ignites the spark of anxiety with its knowledge. It seems to be a distant one. When pondered over this from the existentialist angle, Camus does not build a transcendental hope just by placing it upon an irrational faith, instead he does approach it through logistics chosen at rational level. He
places the crisis at an immediate level and the solution offered to it, in the wake of undergoing predicament. One may compare Aparna’s approach to cancer with Dr. Rieux’s conception of the plague. Both being visualized as a never ending defeat, serve as an example of existentialist optimism without hope in respective novels.

Full consciousness, refusing to submit, and keeping on: these are the answers Camus gives to his question about suicide and constitute his alternative to a belief in God. This, he is saying, is how a life without ultimate meaning can be made worth living. It is a triumph to live a life fully aware of its limits while striving against them. (Aronson 267)

In Deshpande’s Strangers to Ourselves, Jyoti also fights a triumphant battle against death. Unlike many other patients, who resign and withdraw themselves from the disease, Jyoti wants to study her enemy closely. As in Camus’ Plague, the disease reminds people of their mortality and reaps within them a consciousness of their existence. Jyoti comes to Aparna for treatment with immense optimism and doesn’t give up to imminent death. She finds a temporal fulfillment and satisfaction in translating the work of Dandekar’s grandmother, “Ahalya’s Story”. This sub plot in the novel serves to be a story of human subject and the life experiences in general.

Ahalya, who is revealed as Aparna’s great grand mother writes an autobiography. “Maybe I have a hope that by writing about my life I will make some sense of it.”(132) Ahalya in her story talks about her husband whom she addresses as “he” and identifies her stand with respect to her husband. She discusses about her parental home and her home after marriage. Ahalya finds a meaning in her life by writing about ‘him’. It makes her discover a self which she could fend for herself, having separated it from all the other relative selves wherein she used to find her identity earlier. The subplot reveals
her life being a widow at the widows home and later as a headmistress and how a painter brings colours back in her life through his presence.

Ahalya was deeply influenced by the philosophy of ‘him’, her unnamed husband, whom she addresses as ‘he’. Through Ahalya, the writer has portrayed a self analysis of Ahalya, wherein the depiction of Ahalya is of a universal human subject, trying to come to terms with life, its pursuits and its revelations. Finally, it pins down at a point wherein one identifies the ultimate deliverance, quite in sync with Camus’ emphasis on the concrete individualistic character.

Ahalya reminiscences her childhood and her life of learning when she got married to ‘him’. Later, Bhausaheb sends her to a widow’s home in order to keep up with the promise which he made to his son, that he would not get her head shaved. There she meets the painter who gives her the gateway to a new life. Viewed from the existentialist angle one discovers, Ahalya met the painter, while she was leading a life of despair. The negativity, infact the absurdity around her, created an atmosphere of loneliness and futility in general. The moment she accepted her predicament and gave in to identify her lost self in the new interpretation of same life she could be associated with the triumphant Absurd Hero/ine. Absurdity, inhibited within the life of our daily routine, makes us perceive the temporality and lack of meaninglessness which every activity in our mechanized lives imbibes. Here, Deshpande presents a stark contrast of situations with regard to the matter of choice. On the one hand, there is Ahalya, who never had any control over her doings, flowing along with the current of life. The events which followed, were out of reach for her, being bound by the age and lack of awareness. On
the other hand, ‘He’ was quite sure of what ‘he’ wanted. And Ahalya happened to be his
deliberate choice.

Everyone called it Fate, but ‘he’ did not believe in Fate. ‘He’ said we
control our own lives, not something called Fate. To believe in Fate, ‘he’
said, means you make no effort yourself; it’s a lazy way of thinking, ‘he’
said. We need to know where we are going, we need to swim, not to let
ourselves float. (Deshpande 138-39)

Lives of individuals are shaped by action and the thought which precedes their action,
because even if there is something called as ephemeral truth, it lies in the conscious
choice made by the individual. It is irrespective of the consequence and in complete
coordination with the zeal, to find meaning in the choice. Like Camus says, it’s a matter
of choice, whether or not consider the world as a battlefield with the warriors battling
with their lives. They may leave everything on an external force which could redeem
mankind or rely on a personal effort, in identifying a sense of reconciliation with the
absurd and the world to uplift their soul.

The novel brings out the loneliness and isolation experienced by different people in
different sphere of their lives. Aparna, Shri Hari, Jyoti, Ahalya, they all are part of it.
They undergo the existentialist dilemma and make choices for themselves to give
meaning to their life. The main as well as the sub plot of the novel involves existentialist
dilemma and the significance of choice they finally cling to.

Jyoti adds a sense of achievement to her living by being able to complete her task.
“Obviously, my life and my world are still most important to me, but I got to know these
remarkable people, Ahalya, her ‘he’and the painter and the loving little girl, Durga. And I
feel that as long as the world has such humans, life will continue to be meaningful.”(285)
Aparna unable to forgive her father, later affirms his existence. “Jyoti, in getting back
Ahalya, has reclaimed the Baba of my childhood and given him back to me.” (289) Jyoti’s limited time period found fruition in understanding the fragile thread, which underlies all human relationships. The quest of Jyoti and Aparna creates a reminder of the prologue to the novel, wherein the pursuit of human happiness stems through love and finds purpose in purposelessness. It certifies Aparna’s stand to fill up the abyss within her and wish for completeness in human relationships. It provides a temporal understanding of the subtlety of all existent relationships, which becomes the pivotal understatement in all living.

Shashi Deshpande in *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays* states:

> The truth which also involves an understanding of the relationship between human beings, the relationship of a human with the Inner self, of humans with society, with the physical universe and the other unseen universe we know we are also part of. (105)

The presence of Absurd which is explored in the novels of Shashi Deshpande through their engagement with the themes of loneliness, emptiness, alienation, choices made by the individuals and the responsibility taken over by them. It is associated with an individual experiencing his/her confinement within one’s limited time period of life. Having identified the existentialist dilemma which surfaces with time, the challenge lies in how to survive along with the absurd. The world suddenly lifts its curtains and reveals the real nature of the universe. It features as an illusory background against the various stages of life, which has only ‘nothing’ to offer. It requires immense courage and resilience to come across a point in life wherein the individual is struck bewildered in one’s encounter with the absurd. What makes the Absurd gain immense significance in the post modern era is not just the starkness which it posits as a consequence of the period but the quest, which it enables to execute by the individual. Deshpande’s hero-ines
undertake the same journey in order to identify their higher stance for themselves and in relation to the society as well reflecting Camus’ optimism.