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BETWEEN LOVE AND STRANGERS: AN EXPLORATION OF FRIENDSHIP, BETRAYAL, EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT, AND IDENTITY IN SHRIJEET SHANDILYA'S *CAN WE BE STRANGERS AGAIN?*

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Abstract
Contemporary literature frequently explores the complexities of human relationships, emotional attachment, romantic disappointment, and the psychological consequences of separation. Shrijeet Shandilya's Can We Be Strangers Again? (2024/2025) presents an engaging exploration of friendship, love, loyalty, betrayal, and the difficulties associated with letting go of meaningful relationships. Set against the experiences of college life, the novel examines how emotional intimacy transforms interpersonal relationships and how romantic involvement can destabilize previously established friendships. Through the interconnected experiences of Dev, Avantika, and Tanishka, the narrative raises a significant psychological and philosophical question: Can individuals who have shared profound emotional experiences genuinely return to being strangers? This research examines the representation of emotional attachment, friendship, betrayal, romantic expectations, psychological vulnerability, and the reconstruction of personal identity in the novel. Drawing upon attachment theory, the triangular theory of love, and the concept of narrative identity, the study investigates the relationship between emotional dependence and individual development. The research employs a qualitative interpretive approach to explore the novel's central concerns and its relevance to contemporary young-adult experiences. It argues that the novel's central question extends beyond romantic separation and becomes an inquiry into memory, emotional identity, and the lasting influence of interpersonal relationships. The study concludes that becoming strangers again is not necessarily an achievable emotional condition; rather, it represents an attempt to negotiate the distance between remembered intimacy and present separation.
Keywords: *Emotional Attachment, Friendship and Betrayal, Romantic Relationships, Psychological Identity, Contemporary Indian Fiction.*

1. Introduction

Literature has consistently represented love, friendship, separation, and human suffering as fundamental dimensions of the human experience. From classical tragedies to contemporary romantic fiction, writers have explored the emotional consequences of relationships and the ways individuals respond to affection, disappointment, betrayal, and loss. In contemporary literature, these concerns have acquired new significance because interpersonal relationships are increasingly

associated with questions of emotional independence, personal identity, social expectations, and psychological well-being.

Shrijeet Shandilya's *Can We Be Strangers Again?* is a contemporary romantic novel that examines the complicated relationship between friendship and love. Published initially through Notion Press in 2024 and subsequently by Penguin Random House India's Ebury Press in 2025, the novel presents the interconnected lives of three college friends whose emotional relationships undergo significant transformations. The publisher's description identifies Dev, Avantika, and Tanishka as central figures in a narrative involving friendship, romantic involvement, betrayal, and the difficult process of letting go.

The novel begins with the emotional closeness of college friendships, where shared experiences, late-night conversations, laughter, and unspoken promises create a sense of belonging. However, when friendship develops into romantic involvement, the established emotional balance begins to change. Romantic expectations, competing loyalties, and betrayal complicate the relationships among the characters. Consequently, the novel explores the vulnerability of human connections and the possibility that relationships may become sources of both happiness and suffering.

The title itself functions as a central philosophical question. The word *strangers* ordinarily refers to individuals who have no established personal connection. However, when applied to people who have previously shared emotional intimacy, the term acquires a more complicated meaning. Former friends and lovers may discontinue communication, separate physically, and establish independent lives, but their shared memories remain part of their personal histories.

The present research investigates the psychological, emotional, and literary dimensions of this transformation. It argues that the novel represents separation not simply as the termination of a relationship but as a complex process involving memory, attachment, disappointment, and the reconstruction of identity.

2. Background of the Study

Contemporary romantic fiction frequently examines the emotional experiences of young individuals navigating friendship, attraction, commitment, and separation. College life provides a particularly significant setting for such narratives because it represents a transitional period during which individuals develop personal identities, establish social relationships, and encounter new emotional responsibilities.

In *Can We Be Strangers Again?*, the college environment provides the background for the formation and transformation of relationships. The friendship among Dev, Avantika, and Tanishka initially represents emotional security and shared belonging. However, the introduction of romantic feelings challenges the stability of this friendship.

The novel's significance lies in its examination of the emotional boundaries between friendship and romantic love. It suggests that relationships are not always governed by clearly defined categories. Friendship may contain unexpressed affection, romantic relationships may develop from existing emotional intimacy, and betrayal may transform relationships that once appeared secure.

The study therefore approaches the novel as a representation of contemporary emotional experiences, particularly those associated with young adulthood, interpersonal expectations, and the psychological consequences of relationship breakdown.

3. Statement of the Problem

Although romantic relationships and heartbreak are frequently represented in contemporary fiction, the emotional consequences of losing a relationship that originated in friendship require further critical examination. Individuals who experience separation do not necessarily lose their emotional connection immediately. Their memories, expectations, and previous experiences may continue to influence their identities and subsequent relationships.

In Shandilya's novel, the transition from friendship to romantic involvement creates tensions that challenge existing emotional bonds. The resulting betrayal and separation raise questions about loyalty, emotional responsibility, forgiveness, and the possibility of returning to an earlier relationship.

The central problem addressed in this research is the contradiction between physical separation and emotional continuity. The study examines whether individuals can genuinely become strangers after sharing intimate experiences or whether their previous relationships remain permanently embedded in their psychological identities.

4. Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the representation of friendship and romantic love in *Can We Be Strangers Again?*.
2. To investigate the psychological consequences of emotional attachment and betrayal.
3. To explore the transformation of interpersonal relationships within the context of college life.
4. To analyse the significance of memory, separation, and emotional dependence.
5. To investigate the relationship between romantic disappointment and individual identity.
6. To evaluate the novel's representation of forgiveness, emotional maturity, and letting go.
7. To examine the relevance of the novel's central themes to contemporary young-adult experiences.

5. Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does Shrijeet Shandilya represent the relationship between friendship and romantic love?
2. In what ways does betrayal transform the emotional relationships among the central characters?
3. How does emotional attachment influence individual identity and psychological development?
4. What role does memory play in the experience of separation?
5. How does the novel explore the possibility of returning to emotional unfamiliarity after intimacy?
6. What does the novel suggest about forgiveness, emotional independence, and the process of moving forward?

6. Literature Review

6.1 Love and Emotional Attachment in Literary Studies

Love has remained one of the most significant subjects in literary criticism because it involves complex emotional, psychological, and social relationships. Literary representations of love frequently examine desire, commitment, loyalty, sacrifice, jealousy, and disappointment.

Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love identifies three major components of romantic relationships: intimacy, passion, and commitment. These components provide a useful framework for understanding the different dimensions of interpersonal relationships in contemporary romantic fiction.

In Shandilya's novel, friendship initially provides intimacy and emotional companionship. However, the development of romantic involvement introduces additional expectations and responsibilities. The resulting complications demonstrate that emotional intimacy does not automatically guarantee stability or commitment.

6.2 Attachment Theory and Relationship Breakdown

Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory provides an important psychological perspective for examining the development of emotional bonds. According to attachment theory, early experiences of relationships influence the ways individuals establish and maintain emotional connections.

Although Bowlby's original work primarily concerns attachment development, attachment theory has subsequently been applied to adult romantic relationships. Hazan and Shaver (1987) demonstrate the relevance of attachment patterns to romantic experiences.

This perspective is useful for examining the emotional consequences of separation in *Can We Be Strangers Again?*. When individuals become emotionally dependent on another person, the breakdown of that relationship may create feelings of insecurity, disappointment, and psychological vulnerability.

6.3 Friendship, Loyalty, and Betrayal

Friendship is frequently represented in literature as a relationship based on trust, mutual understanding, companionship, and shared experiences. However, friendship becomes complicated when romantic feelings introduce competing expectations.

The relationship among Dev, Avantika, and Tanishka provides a narrative context for examining this conflict. Their experiences demonstrate how changes in emotional priorities can destabilize established relationships.

Betrayal is particularly significant because it challenges the assumptions upon which friendship is constructed. When trust is damaged, individuals may question not only the relationship but also their understanding of the other person's intentions.

6.4 Memory, Identity, and Separation

Memory plays an important role in the formation of personal identity. Ricoeur (1992) explains identity through the relationship between personal continuity, narrative interpretation, and the experiences through which individuals understand themselves.

From this perspective, separation cannot be understood exclusively as a physical or social event. The memories associated with previous relationships remain part of an individual's personal narrative.

The central question of Shandilya's novel therefore has implications beyond romance. It asks whether people can remove the emotional significance of another person from their personal histories.

6.5 Contemporary Young-Adult Fiction

Young-adult and new-adult fiction frequently explores identity formation, emotional uncertainty, social belonging, romantic relationships, and the transition towards adulthood.

Can We Be Strangers Again? participates in this literary tradition by placing interpersonal relationships within the college environment. Its narrative concerns reflect the emotional challenges associated with growing up, discovering personal boundaries, and learning to negotiate relationships.

7. Theoretical Framework

The present research employs three interconnected theoretical perspectives.

7.1 Attachment Theory

Attachment theory provides the psychological foundation for examining emotional closeness, dependence, and separation. Bowlby's (1969) framework helps explain why the loss of an important relationship may create emotional distress.

Applied to the novel, this theory allows an examination of how friendship and romantic involvement create emotional expectations and how relationship breakdown may influence the characters' psychological experiences.

7.2 Triangular Theory of Love

Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love identifies intimacy, passion, and commitment as three important dimensions of romantic relationships.

The framework helps distinguish friendship-based intimacy from romantic involvement and provides a conceptual basis for examining the expectations that emerge when friendship develops into love.

7.3 Narrative Identity Theory

Ricoeur's (1992) understanding of personal identity provides a framework for investigating the relationship between memory and individual development.

The characters' previous relationships become part of their personal histories. Even when their circumstances change, their experiences continue to influence their understanding of love, trust, and themselves.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multidisciplinary foundation for understanding the novel's representation of relationships, emotional suffering, and identity.

8. Research Methodology

8.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design. Qualitative analysis is appropriate because the research investigates emotional experiences, interpersonal relationships, literary themes, and psychological meanings rather than numerical variables.

8.2 Research Approach

The research employs a thematic and theoretical approach to literary interpretation. It examines the major conceptual dimensions of friendship, romantic attachment, betrayal, memory, separation, and identity.

8.3 Primary Text

The primary literary text is:

Shandilya, S. (2025). *Can We Be Strangers Again?* Ebury Press, Penguin Random House India.

8.4 Secondary Sources

The study draws upon established theoretical works concerning attachment, romantic love, and personal identity. These sources provide the conceptual foundation for interpreting the novel.

8.5 Method of Analysis

The analysis is organized around the following thematic categories:

- Friendship and emotional intimacy.
- Romantic love and changing expectations.
- Betrayal and the breakdown of trust.
- Psychological vulnerability and emotional dependence.
- Memory and the continuity of personal identity.
- Separation, forgiveness, and emotional independence.

8.6 Scope and Limitation

The research focuses on the novel's central relational conflict and its psychological and literary implications. It does not claim to establish the author's personal intentions or to reproduce detailed textual interpretations unsupported by verified passages. Page-specific close reading, stylistic analysis, and direct textual evidence would further strengthen the study when examined against the complete primary text.

9. Textual and Thematic Analysis

9.1 Friendship as the Foundation of Emotional Intimacy

Friendship represents one of the fundamental elements of human social existence. It provides companionship, emotional support, trust, and a sense of belonging. In literary narratives, friendship often becomes the foundation upon which more complicated emotional relationships develop.

In *Can We Be Strangers Again?*, the friendship among Dev, Avantika, and Tanishka establishes the initial emotional structure of the narrative. Their shared college experiences create a sense of closeness that extends beyond ordinary social interaction.

The significance of this friendship lies in its emotional familiarity. Friends become accustomed to one another's presence, communication patterns, habits, and expectations. Consequently, the breakdown of such a relationship may produce a sense of loss that extends beyond the absence of companionship.

The novel's exploration of friendship suggests that emotional intimacy can create expectations that are difficult to manage when relationships change. Friendship may appear uncomplicated until romantic feelings introduce new emotional responsibilities.

9.2 The Transformation of Friendship into Romantic Love

One of the major concerns of contemporary romantic literature is the transformation of friendship into romantic attachment. Such a transition may create happiness and emotional fulfilment, but it may also produce uncertainty and conflict.

Sternberg's (1986) theory provides a useful explanation of this transformation. Friendship frequently develops through intimacy and companionship, whereas romantic relationships may involve passion and expectations of commitment.

In the novel, the movement from friendship towards romance challenges the existing relationships among the three central characters. The transformation changes how individuals understand one another and what they expect from their relationships.

This transition also raises questions about emotional exclusivity. A friendship may accommodate different social relationships, but romantic involvement can introduce expectations of priority, commitment, and loyalty.

The narrative consequently illustrates the fragility of interpersonal arrangements when emotional expectations are not shared or understood.

9.3 Betrayal and the Destruction of Trust

Betrayal is among the most emotionally significant experiences represented in relationship-centred fiction. It damages the trust that makes intimacy possible and can fundamentally change the way individuals interpret their previous experiences.

In Shandilya's novel, betrayal functions as an important turning point in the relationships among the characters. The publisher's description identifies betrayal as the event that disrupts their previously established emotional world.

The psychological significance of betrayal extends beyond the immediate experience of disappointment. It may cause individuals to reconsider their assumptions about loyalty, honesty, affection, and emotional security.

A particularly painful aspect of betrayal is its capacity to transform memories. Experiences that were previously associated with happiness may subsequently become connected with disappointment or regret.

Thus, the novel's relational conflict can be understood as an examination of how damaged trust affects both present relationships and the interpretation of the past.

9.4 Emotional Dependence and Psychological Vulnerability

Emotional dependence emerges when individuals begin to associate their sense of security, happiness, or self-worth with another person's presence and approval.

Attachment theory offers an important framework for examining this phenomenon. Bowlby (1969) argues that emotional bonds are central to human psychological development.

When an important relationship becomes unstable, individuals may experience insecurity and emotional distress. The loss of an emotionally significant person can therefore affect an individual's sense of personal stability.

The relationships represented in *Can We Be Strangers Again?* provide an opportunity to examine the vulnerability associated with emotional investment.

The novel's broader significance lies in its suggestion that love is not simply an experience of affection. It also involves expectations, responsibilities, emotional risks, and the possibility of disappointment.

9.5 Memory as an Obstacle to Becoming Strangers

Memory is central to the philosophical meaning of the novel's title. Two people may discontinue communication, avoid one another, and develop separate lives. However, their shared experiences cannot necessarily be removed from their personal histories.

Ricoeur's (1992) approach to narrative identity suggests that individuals understand themselves through the interpretation of their experiences over time.

From this perspective, a previous relationship becomes part of the individual's personal narrative. The memories of conversations, promises, affection, and disappointment contribute to the development of personal identity.

The concept of becoming strangers again therefore contains an inherent contradiction. Strangers are unfamiliar with one another, whereas former friends and lovers possess knowledge of each other's experiences and emotional histories.

The novel's title invites readers to consider whether emotional separation can ever completely eliminate the significance of previous intimacy.

9.6 The Conflict Between Past and Present

A significant dimension of relationship breakdown involves the tension between the past and the present.

The past may contain memories of emotional security and happiness, while the present may be characterized by silence, distance, or disappointment. Individuals experiencing separation must negotiate the difference between what a relationship once represented and what it has become.

This conflict is particularly relevant to contemporary romantic fiction because relationships often influence the development of personal expectations.

In the context of the novel, the question of becoming strangers again reflects the difficulty of accepting that a meaningful relationship may no longer exist in its previous form.

The characters' relational experiences therefore provide a literary context for examining the emotional transition from familiarity to distance.

9.7 College Life and the Formation of Personal Identity

College life is an important transitional stage in which individuals encounter new social environments, develop relationships, and negotiate their identities.

The college setting of *Can We Be Strangers Again?* provides a context for examining the relationship between personal development and emotional experience.

Friendship and romantic relationships can influence the ways young adults understand their values, priorities, and expectations. Emotional disappointments may also encourage reflection and the development of personal boundaries.

The novel consequently engages with a wider concern of young-adult fiction: the process of discovering oneself through relationships with others.

9.8 Letting Go as a Process of Emotional Development

Letting go is often understood as the ability to accept the end of a relationship without allowing the past to determine the entirety of one's future.

However, emotional recovery does not necessarily require forgetting. Individuals may continue to remember significant relationships while developing healthier ways of understanding their experiences.

The novel's central concern with separation and emotional loss provides an opportunity to consider the distinction between forgetting someone and accepting that the relationship has changed.

Emotional maturity may therefore involve recognizing the limitations of reconciliation, accepting personal responsibility, and establishing an independent sense of identity.

9.9 Forgiveness and the Possibility of Reconciliation

Forgiveness is a complicated emotional process because it involves the relationship between memory, responsibility, and trust.

Although forgiveness may reduce hostility, it does not automatically restore a damaged relationship. Similarly, reconciliation requires mutual willingness and a recognition of the reasons behind previous conflict.

The novel's exploration of friendship and betrayal makes forgiveness an important conceptual dimension of its narrative.

The question is not simply whether individuals can forgive one another but whether they can rebuild the emotional conditions that once supported their relationships.

This distinction emphasizes that forgiveness and reconciliation are separate processes.

9.10 The Philosophical Significance of the Title

The title *Can We Be Strangers Again?* functions as more than a romantic question. It expresses a philosophical problem concerning the relationship between human experience and personal identity.

The word *again* is especially significant because it suggests a return to an earlier condition. However, the experience of intimacy fundamentally changes the relationship between two individuals.

People who have shared important experiences cannot return to the exact psychological condition that existed before they met. Their knowledge of one another becomes part of their personal histories.

The title therefore challenges the assumption that separation can reverse emotional involvement.

Rather than presenting strangers as individuals without memories of one another, the title suggests the impossibility of completely undoing the emotional significance of a shared past.

10. Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that *Can We Be Strangers Again?* can be examined as a literary representation of the complex relationship between emotional intimacy and personal identity.

The novel's central conflict emerges from the transformation of friendship into romantic involvement and the subsequent disruption of interpersonal trust. The relationships among Dev, Avantika, and Tanishka provide the narrative foundation for exploring how changing emotional expectations can destabilize established friendships.

The application of attachment theory suggests that relationship breakdown may produce psychological vulnerability because emotional connections contribute to an individual's sense of security. Sternberg's theory further explains how intimacy, passion, and commitment may create different expectations within romantic relationships.

Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity offers another important dimension. The memories associated with previous relationships remain part of individual identity even after physical and emotional separation.

These theoretical perspectives collectively suggest that becoming strangers again is not simply a matter of discontinuing communication. It involves negotiating the psychological consequences of previous intimacy.

The novel also contributes to contemporary young-adult fiction by presenting relationships as experiences through which individuals discover personal boundaries, emotional responsibilities, and the complexities of human behaviour.

Its central question remains relevant because contemporary relationships frequently involve tensions between emotional dependence and individual independence.

11. Major Findings

The research identifies the following major findings:

1. **Friendship and romantic love are interconnected:** The novel illustrates how romantic involvement may transform existing friendships and introduce new emotional expectations.
2. **Betrayal destabilizes emotional security:** The breakdown of trust affects not only present relationships but also the interpretation of previous experiences.
3. **Emotional attachment creates vulnerability:** Relationships become psychologically significant when individuals associate them with security, belonging, and personal happiness.
4. **Memory complicates separation:** Shared experiences remain part of personal identity even after relationships end.
5. **Emotional independence requires acceptance:** Moving forward involves recognizing the changed nature of relationships rather than attempting to erase the past.
6. **Forgiveness does not guarantee reconciliation:** The restoration of trust requires more than the willingness to forgive.
7. **The title expresses a philosophical contradiction:** Formerly intimate individuals cannot necessarily return to the emotional unfamiliarity of strangers.

12. Significance of the Study

This research contributes to literary studies by examining the relationship between contemporary romantic fiction and psychological understandings of emotional attachment.

It offers an interpretive perspective on how literature represents friendship, betrayal, separation, and the reconstruction of personal identity.

The study is significant for students and researchers working in English literature, contemporary fiction, psychological literary criticism, and relationship studies.

It also demonstrates how a contemporary romantic novel can provide a framework for examining broader human experiences, including emotional vulnerability, social belonging, forgiveness, and personal development.

Furthermore, the research encourages readers to approach heartbreak not merely as a romantic experience but as a complex psychological and philosophical condition.

13. Conclusion

Shrijeet Shandilya's *Can We Be Strangers Again?* offers a meaningful exploration of friendship, romantic attachment, betrayal, emotional vulnerability, and the difficulties associated with separation. Through the interconnected experiences of Dev, Avantika, and Tanishka, the novel presents the instability of relationships when friendship develops into romantic involvement and competing emotional expectations emerge.

The central question of the novel challenges the possibility of returning to a condition of complete unfamiliarity after experiencing emotional intimacy. A relationship may end, communication may disappear, and individuals may establish separate lives, but their shared experiences continue to contribute to their personal histories.

The theoretical perspectives of Bowlby, Sternberg, and Ricoeur provide valuable ways of understanding these dimensions. Attachment theory explains the psychological significance of emotional bonds, the triangular theory of love clarifies the different components of romantic relationships, and narrative identity theory illuminates the relationship between memory and personal development.

The study concludes that becoming strangers again is not necessarily a literal or psychological possibility. It is better understood as a desire for emotional distance from experiences that once held profound significance. The process of moving forward does not require the complete destruction of memory; rather, it involves accepting the past without remaining emotionally imprisoned by it.

Ultimately, the novel's title expresses a universal human dilemma: people may leave one another's lives, but they cannot always remove one another from their memories. The possibility of becoming strangers again therefore remains less a question of physical separation than an exploration of emotional history, personal identity, and the enduring significance of human relationships.

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