



Representations of Women's Agency and Gendered Subjectivity in Preeti Shenoy's Selected Novels: A Liberal Feminist Analysis

MRS S. SHYAMALA^{1*}, DR. M. P. ANUJA²,

^{1*}Reg No: 21221204012003, Research Scholar, Research Centre in English, Sri Parasakthi College for Women (Autonomous), Courtallam, Tenkasi-627802. (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli) Tamil Nadu, India.

²Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor, Research Centre in English, Sri Parasakthi College for Women (Autonomous), Courtallam, Tenkasi-627802. (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli) Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Women's identities are typically shaped by ideals of family honour, obedience, and household duties rather than self-expression or individual independence in highly patriarchal settings where women are subject to patriarchal standards. Gendered subjectivity is the extent to which cultural norms and gender norms influence women's self-perceptions, emotional lives, and self-beliefs. Most literary depictions of women's internal struggles also emphasise how these norms influence women's emotions and choices. Through Preeti Shenoy's selected novels, *Life Is What You Make It*, *Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake*, *The Secret Wishlist*, *It Happens for a Reason*, and *The Rule Breakers*, this paper aims to delineate how her female protagonists' gender identities are constructed. They can redefine femininity as active and compassionate, rather than passive and submissive, through relational and feminist agency.

Keywords: Empowerment, Female identity, Gender Prejudice, Patriarchy, Oppression

Preeti Shenoy, one of the most contemporary and well-known authors, through her fictional and non-fictional writings, consistently explores the concepts of freedom and the injustice of women. Most of her works are relevant to modern society and ideas. Thus, she represents both male and female characters in her novels, which are based on the social environment. As it is widely known, literature and society are two sides of the coin. Literature cannot survive without modern significance. Numerous instances of this are observed in Shenoy's works that are relevant to present-day society. The female characters used by Preeti Shenoy react bravely and confidently towards the traditions and conventions that are patriarchal in nature. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the female characters in Shenoy's novels create rebellious, conscious gendered subjectivities that challenge sexism and injustice in both their own families and society at large.

Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*,

What is certain is that it is very difficult for women to assume both their status of autonomous individuals and their feminine destiny. Without doubt, it is more comfortable to endure blind bondage than to work for one's liberation... Then will she fully be a human being when women's infinite servitude to man is broken, when she lives for herself and by herself. (324)

Women's writings are classified under two perspectives, which include: an eye opener of the society through the frame of mind of women, and the other is a feminist standpoint of equality within the society. Preeti Shenoy addresses both these points of view in her novels.

Liberal Feminism is an ideology that advocates for the growth of individual rights and liberties, particularly in the political and economic spheres. Democracy, individual liberty, equality of rights and opportunity are the fundamental tenets of liberalism. It also promotes political equality, which includes pay parity, women's equal rights in education, the right to vote, and participation in the workforce. To put it briefly, liberal feminists aspire to be treated equally and have the same rights as men to engage actively in society.

As an analytical approach, liberal feminism assumes that the root of female oppression lies in customary and legal restrictions that prevent women's entry into the realm of the public. In the body of fiction that comprises Shenoy, this cognisance goes beyond political posturing to become a survival strategy of the modern Indian woman. Ankita in *Life is What You Make It*, Nisha in *Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake*, Diksha in *The Secret Wishlist*, Vipasha in *It Happens for a Reason*, and Veda in *The Rule Breakers*, the main characters, demonstrate a new consciousness of their personal right to education and career identity. Shenoy's female characters always look for dignity, independence, and autonomy to decide their lives and relationships.

Ankita Sharma, the protagonist in *Life is What You Make It*, is the brightest example of the liberal feminist ideal of intellectual independence. For Ankita, academic performance and professional path are the major sources of identity. She is driven to recover even when a debilitating onset of bipolar disorder occurs in her life, and she desires to continue her education further. This is reminiscent of the traditional liberal belief that women, just like men, are rational beings, whose

empowerment is directly connected to the development of the mind. Her story is a deep example of how mental health and female agency are linked; she can never be fully healed until she can stand on her own feet as an educated and independent woman. Shenoy uses the character Ankita to prove that the right to a healthy mind, to the modern Indian woman, is a prerequisite of the right to a career. Ankita expresses her liberal view as

No more school uniforms. No more strict rules. No more being treated as a kid. I would be 18 on my next birthday and officially an adult. I felt excited, as legally it meant I was eligible to marry and vote..... It was an exhilarating feeling — like a caterpillar emerging out of a cocoon. I could hardly wait. (*Life* 16)

The liberal pursuit of a perfect life, as seen in *Life Is What You Make It*, also provides a critical look at the immense pressure placed on modern women. Ankita's breakdown is partly due to the high standards of success imposed by a society that only values women if they are high-achieving super-women. Liberal feminism in the Indian context, as seen through Ankita, must therefore address not just the right to work, but the right to fail and the right to seek help. This emotional independence is a recurring theme in Shenoy's work, where the protagonists learn that true autonomy means being responsible for one's own happiness rather than relying on the approval of others. This is a crucial evolution in the representation of Indian women in fiction, moving from the "suffering martyr" to the "resilient individualist."

In the novel *Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake*, there is another aspect of liberal feminism: the strength that is discovered in economic independence after a marital bond is broken. Here, the character Nisha does not fall into tragedy after her husband leaves; she uses her abilities and opens a successful cooking business. Such a transformation of the concept of dependency into the concept of entrepreneurship is one of the features of the liberal feminist transition. Shenoy highlights the fact that the emotional journey that Nisha experiences is central, but her professional achievement provides a structural base for the emotional healing.

During the eight years of their marriage, Nisha has ceased to think about her happiness, her needs, and time. She expresses her loss of identity as "Eight years and I have achieved nothing. It is like I have taken four lefts from the centre and have reached back where I began" (*Tea for Two* 99). Whenever Nisha is around with his mother, her husband, Samir, asks her to wear a salwar kameez. He also leaves a command to Nisha after marriage, where she will not be allowed to pursue her career. Nisha, like any other woman in India, believes that there is a need to sacrifice her desires in order to please her husband. The patriarchal structure has taught her that men are superior and, therefore, their interests must be taken into consideration rather than a woman's. Here, Samir abruptly makes a call and informs her that he is planning to leave her and has decided to live with a young lady. This portrays that a woman is not an equal partner in a marital relationship.

In this novel, Nisha's struggle highlights the gendered injustice in which women are often made economically dependent on men and then left to suffer the consequences when men evade their responsibilities as husbands and fathers. Yet, rather than collapsing under this pressure, Nisha transforms her crisis into a space of empowerment by stepping into the business world and establishing a restaurant of her own, thereby challenging traditional assumptions that confine women to domestic roles. Women of this day and age can live their lives the way they want without the emotional and moral backing of society. Nisha understands the value of being able to earn money on her own, and so she is no longer at the mercy of her husband, who owns her. She wants to be equal and liberated and wishes to be recognised as a person, not only based on the gender she belongs to.

The liberal consciousness in the novel *The Secret Wishlist* is discussed from the perspective of a woman who has already submerged herself in the traditional roles of the wife and the mother, but cannot be satisfied with that. The novel outlines the pathetic plight of a woman in the patriarchal world. The protagonist, Diksha, is a replica of an ordinary Indian woman, who takes everything imposed on her first by her parents and later by her husband. The wishlist of Diksha is a symbolic reflection of liberalism in seeking personal happiness and the right to live outside of the domestic sphere. Though many women keep wish lists and find it easy to pursue them, Diksha, who grew up in a traditional setting, does not have the freedom to chase her dreams. She starts by enumerating wishes that she had long repressed in an attempt to fulfil them. She expresses her agony as,

All this trouble has been caused precisely because I haven't spoken out. I have complied with all your wishes. You pulled me out of school, you sent me to another city, to a strict women's college and you forced me to marry early. I really did not have a choice. I am speaking from a place of strength that is coming from all the years of suppression. (*The Secret* 250)

A contemporary woman can live her life the way she wants. She does not beg for emotional or moral support from society. Here, Diksha slowly understands the importance of financial self-reliance that frees her from the autocratic husband who treats her as a slave. The story of Diksha is that of regaining her lost self, which explores that the liberal ideal of self-actualisation is not limited to a young age but is a lifelong entitlement.

In the novel, *It Happens for a Reason*, the protagonist Vipasha (Vee) takes liberal self-determination to its most modern extreme. Here, the protagonist is characterised through her struggle with motherhood, social judgment, and emotional vulnerability, making her a powerful example of Shenoy's interest in portraying women who rebuild their lives through resilience and self-belief. By choosing to raise her child as a single mother while successfully running a dog-boarding business, Vee rejects the "compulsory heterosexuality" and the "mandatory marriage" scripts that dominate Indian society. Vee's character is unapologetic about her choices, embodying a high degree of emotional and financial independence. She proves that a woman can be a "nurturer" and a "provider" simultaneously, breaking the gendered division of labor that liberal feminism has long fought to dissolve.

In the next novel, *The Rule Breakers*, the protagonist Veda is a representation of a woman who has to go through the process of changing her traditional way of thinking to liberal self-determination. Being brought up in a conservative environment, where the choice of her career course is predetermined by her parents, the transfer of Veda to a city environment to pursue her education becomes the trigger of her enlightenment. Veda's family prioritises finding her a suitable partner, considering that three sisters are lining up after her, which leads her to get married earlier. Veda's mother expresses the social expectations for women as "Sometimes, you have to sacrifice what you want in the interests of the family" (*The Rule* 28). Here, Veda is not just fighting her parents but the internalised good girl syndrome that liberal feminism is trying to break. Her ultimate choice to follow her career and life path is a statement of her uniqueness in a highly strict social structure.

Furthermore, the theme of education as a liberatory tool is echoed in *The Rule Breakers*, where Veda's learning process after her marriage becomes a means of social critique. Veda's growth is measured by her ability to speak her mind. This intellectual awakening is what allows her to move beyond the role of a daughter who is "given away" in marriage, to a woman who "chooses" her own partners and her own professional destiny.

The common thread across all the novels is the rejection of the "peripheral existence." Whether it is through the lens of a student, a divorcee, a single mother, or a wife, Shenoy's protagonists all demand a seat at the center of their own lives. This is the essence of liberal feminist consciousness: the "assertion of the self" as a distinct, valuable, and autonomous entity.

In the selected novels, we see that liberal feminism does not necessarily mean an abandonment of all social ties, but rather a re-negotiation of those ties based on mutual respect and equal rights. The women do not seek to live in isolation; they seek a society where their career, education, and choices are given the same weight as those of their male counterparts. This "negotiated autonomy" is a hallmark of the contemporary Indian feminist sensibility. Through the detailed depiction of their struggles and successes, Preeti Shenoy highlights that the pursuit of a liberal life is often a quiet, persistent, and deeply courageous act of rule-breaking.

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