



Unveiling the Inner Struggles: An Examination of Psychological Stress and Coping in Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* Based on Albert Bandura's Theory

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Abstract

Women have been facing challenges and stressors in patriarchal society since time immemorial. Over the centuries they have also successfully managed to overcome patriarchal control and claim equality and emotional well-being. This study examines Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* focusing on the protagonist Veda's psychological distress and her psychological journey using Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory as a framework. Through this psychological lens, the analysis explores how societal expectations contribute to characters' inner struggles and emotional distress. It investigates the cognitive processes underlying her reactions, including self-perception, identity formation, and coping mechanisms, and how the character's interpersonal relationships are influenced by her psychological distress. The research also highlights how the protagonist handles distress, fostering resilience and growth despite patriarchal constraints.

Keywords: Psychological distress, Patriarchy, Societal expectations, Internal conflicts, Identity formation, Resilience.

Preeti Shenoy's writing focuses on the challenges faced by middle-class Indian women. Her Women characters undergo significant emotional wounds that impact their lives and relationships. Through resilience and determination they rise above adversity, triumph over patriarchal constraints and strive for gender equality in society. In her novel *The Rule Breakers*, the protagonist Veda experiences psychological distress when she is made a victim of patriarchy, both before and after marriage. She battles depression while enduring subjugation and control from her family. Initially influenced by her father's norms, she later confronts internalized patriarchy from her mother-in-law. Applying Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, the article analyses how Veda utilizes coping mechanisms to overcome her inner struggles and effect positive changes in the world around her.

Veda, a bright and ambitious twenty year old, is the eldest of five children in the Rajinder family. They reside in Joshimath, a mountain town close to Badrinath in Himachal Pradesh. Veda aspires to escape from Joshimath and become a college lecturer. She believes that excelling in her college exams might persuade her father to allow her to pursue her master's degree in Delhi. Despite being a top student in her school, she is denied the chance to study in the city.

The deeply ingrained traditional ideals of Indian society are at play here. Women in India often face inequality, with their dreams and careers taking a backseat. Their education is seen as a waste of money as they move to their husband's household after marriage and therefore will not benefit their biological families. Furthermore women's education is seen as a threat to traditional gender roles and norms that assigned familial and reproductive duties to women and constructive social roles to men.

Veda's father, Rajinder, embodies this patriarchal mindset. He doesn't inquire about Veda's academic achievements or those of her sisters. Strangely, he closely tracks her brother's progress, highlighting the unequal treatment within the family itself. "Didn't you help your brother? What is the use of your getting high marks? You have to ultimately get married and go away" (TRB.pg.9). When Veda argues with her mother about her unwillingness to get married, her father enters and says "What was the condition on which I agreed to let you attend college? Do you remember? he asked her" (TRB.pg.22). Thus Veda faces discrimination and obstacle in the form of patriarchy in pursuing her education.

Veda's role as the eldest girl in a family brings about considerable psychological stress to her due to the weight of responsibilities and societal expectations. She often finds herself in multiple roles as caregivers for younger siblings, adhering to strict behavioral standards as role model, and potentially sacrificing personal freedom and educational or career pursuits. The pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations, including early marriage, leads to inner struggles and a diminished sense of individuality. This results in emotional distress, anxiety, and feelings of powerlessness.

Veda's life takes a significant turn when she marries Bhuwan, an IT professional in Pune. They have very little in common and Veda feels lonely and suffocated in her new home. He does not stand up for Veda when his mother insults or mistreats her. He also has an affair with his friend Vikki, which Veda discovers later. Veda also has to deal with her hostile mother-in-law Padma Devi, who blames her for everything. Her mother-in-law embodies orthodox beliefs and internalized patriarchy, a prominent theme in the novel. The sudden marriage also disrupts Veda's education and shatters her dream of becoming a lecturer. She tries to adjust and compromise but feels that she is losing herself in the process.

At college she grapples with a persistent psychological stress stemming from a sense of exclusion she experiences among her peers due to her marital status. The unease she feels about being married at a relatively early age adds an extra layer of self-consciousness, intensifying her worry about standing out and not fitting in with her peers. This psychological stress manifests as an invisible fence that separates her from her classmates. A letter she pens to Suraj reveals her emotional state, where she describes herself as a "wallflower". This psychological stress leads to feelings of inadequacy, social anxiety, and a heightened sense of self-awareness, all of which impact her emotional well-being in the college setting.

Abuse of newly married women by their mother-in-law is unfortunately a distressing reality in some Indian households. This kind of abuse often falls under the broader category of domestic violence. The abuse can be physical, emotional, psychological, or even economic in nature. It can stem from various factors, including traditional beliefs, cultural norms, power dynamics, and sometimes personal conflicts. These abuse of mother-in-law can have severe physical, emotional, and psychological consequences for newly married women. It can lead to feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

In Pune, Veda's life undergoes a dramatic transformation because of her abusive mother-in-law causing immense emotional turmoil and reshaping her perspective on relationships and self-worth. Within a month of her marriage, she loses her father-in-law and becomes a target of blame and curses from her mother-in-law. Padma Devi strongly believes that Veda's presence brings bad luck because she does not perform religious rituals to maintain spiritual purity. Consequently, Veda has to endure relentless humiliation and scorn inflicted upon her.

Padma Devi derives pleasure from demeaning her and goes to the extent of prying into Veda's personal affairs, even inquiring about an envelope from her sister Vidya. The emotional torment that she inflicts soon escalates to assigning excessive household tasks to Veda, scrutinizing her every move, and hurting her with hurtful words. She doesn't allow her to study beyond college hours, preventing her from using the library for her studies.

In one instance, Padma Devi says to Shanta her neighbour, "I don't want any of these modern girls who want to work and all that I want somebody content to be at home and to look after the house. I think men and women had their roles. It is when one tries to take over the others role that all problems are caused" (TRB.pg.28) Women feel entitled to be placated by their daughter-in-law because they have internalised the patriarchal system.

According to Yamini Pustake Bhalerao an article writer of SheThePeople team,

".. how women themselves have internalised patriarchy is the sense of entitlement for appeasement that many mothers-in-law feel. Because they have internalised the patriarchal system, women believe they are entitled to be appeased by their daughter-in-law."

The verbal abuses of Padmadevi eventually evolves into physical violence. One instance occurs when Veda returns home late, causing her mother-in-law's frustration to peak. In her anger, she grabs Veda's bag and throws the books in the corridor and even she grab the her hair in her fist and twisted and make a violent roll shake. Veda becomes cold and started shaking "She felt breathless, like someone was strangling her. This was the same feeling she used to have when she faced her father's wrath back in Joshimath". (TRB .pg.88) Then Padmadevi makes Veda press her feet for 20 minutes. Veda feels self-loathing. She perceives herself as a "coward, gutless wimp with no backbone" (TRB pg.90) .She completely loses her self-respect,

courage and faith. She finds solace and connection through the letters she writes to her sister Vidya and her friend Suraj, which serve as her primary source of emotional support. These letters are her lifeline, offering her comfort and an outlet to share her thoughts, feelings, and experiences with someone she trusts deeply.

Veda's studies which had remained her only beacon of hope is also disrupted when the numerous challenges she faces negatively impact her academic performance. The weight of the abuses she endures plunges her into the depths of severe depression, rendering her incapable of effectively addressing her circumstances.

Amidst these difficult circumstances, Veda encounters a glimmer of hope when she crosses paths with Kanika, Shanta's daughter. She gives Veda the courage and confidence to break the rules that oppress her, and to live a life of dignity and freedom. Veda takes Kanika as a model to develop healthy coping strategy. She learns from Kanika that women are not inferior or weak, but capable and powerful. The transformative journey that she embarks upon can be analysed through the psychological perspective put forth by Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive theory.

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of observational learning, self-efficacy beliefs, and cognitive processes in shaping human behavior. It suggests that people learn by observing others and evaluating the consequences of their actions. Self-efficacy, or one's belief in their ability to succeed in specific tasks, plays a crucial role in motivation and behavior. This theory underscores the dynamic interplay between environment, cognition, and behavior, highlighting how individuals can learn from their experiences and the actions of others

Veda's exposure to Sankalp, an NGO introduces her to the struggles of slum children, particularly Kajol and Sanju. Through observational learning, she witnesses their determination to learn despite challenging circumstances. Kanika is already her role model whom Veda admires for her commitment and positive impact. Her encounters with the difficulties faced by the children, test her self-efficacy, her belief in her own ability to create change. However, seeing the resilience of these children and learning from Kanika, strengthens her self-efficacy. She develops coping strategies, like focusing on solutions instead of dwelling on obstacles, allowing her to channel challenges into action. Seeking guidance from Kanika and Ron

provides her with valuable insights and helps her navigate challenges more effectively. This aligns with Albert Bandura's theory, emphasizing how support from others contributes to personal development.

Bandura acknowledged the significance of the reciprocal connection between individuals and their behaviours, and the environment. This implies that while individuals are undeniably influenced by their environmental experiences, they also possess the ability to influence their situation and circumstances through their own decisions and actions. In such a reciprocal interaction, Veda who learns ways of coping with stress from the environment creates positive changes within herself and the society around her by making meaningful choices.

Veda's transformation is significantly influenced by her relationship with Bhuwan. Her compassionate and empathetic response to his candid confession about his sexual orientation showcases her emotional maturity and growth. She also challenges patriarchy and gender stereotypes by supporting Bhuwan as he endeavors to break free from the constraints of societal gender norms. Veda's counseling of Bhuwan's mother is an application of Bandura's theory in a social context. Sharing her own experiences, Veda influences and guides Bhuwan's family dynamics positively. This reflects her growth not only in her own journey but also in her capacity to impact others through empathy and communication.

The tragic death of Sanju acts as a turning point for Veda. Instead of succumbing to grief, she channels her emotions into constructive action. She directs her anger and sadness into advocating for justice and change, demonstrating emotional growth and resilience in the face of adversity. Her explosive inquiry commission outburst and subsequent decision to quit her job underscore her empowerment and self-discovery. These actions signify her shift from a passive observer to an active participant, using her voice and agency to challenge norms and fight for justice. This aligns with Bandura's emphasis on individuals' ability to effect change through their actions.

Launching the Rocket school symbolizes the culmination of Veda's evolution. It showcases her breaking away from traditional roles and norms, embracing her identity, and asserting her autonomy. This transformative action echoes Bandura's theory highlighting how individuals can shape their identity and life direction.

Thus Bandura's theory is reflected in Veda's progression from observation to action, her growth in self-efficacy, her utilization of coping strategies, her development of a support system, and her empowerment to create change. The narrative embodies the principles of social cognitive theory, illustrating how external influences, personal beliefs, and actions interact to shape Veda's journey of empowerment and transformation.

Psychological stressors vary from person to person, and their impact depends on an individual's coping mechanisms, resilience, and support systems. Chronic exposure to stressors without effective coping strategies can lead to negative consequences for mental health, potentially leading to anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders. Managing psychological stressors often involves seeking support from friends, family, or professionals, adopting stress-reduction techniques, and making changes to one's lifestyle or environment to alleviate the sources of stress.

Veda in *The Rule Breakers* confronts psychological stressors due to patriarchal societal norms, academic failure, revelation of her husband's sexual orientation, domestic abuse, grief, witnessing children's struggles and lack of support. These stressors contribute to emotional turmoil, isolation, and identity conflict. In the midst of these stressors, Veda's journey toward resilience involves seeking out positive role models, building a support system, and adopting coping strategies. Her transformation showcases the power of inner strength, empathy, and determination in overcoming the psychological distress she faces.

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The Rule Breakers is abbreviated as TRB

