



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Examining The Dreams, Desires And Aspirations Of Women From Different Walks Of Life In “The Secret Wish List” By Preeti Shenoy

¹ Mrs.Deepika Bishoyi, ² Dr.A.Vijayanand

¹Research Scholar, ²Assistant Professor,

¹Department of English,

¹N Kalinga University, Naya Raipur, India

Abstract: The portrayal of women in Indian writing has long captivated the attention of scholars and readers, sparking in-depth discussions about the multifaceted representation of female characters in literature. This paper delves into an insightful analysis of Preeti Shenoy's novel "The Secret Wish List," strategically shining a spotlight on the sheer brilliance of Shenoy's narrative style while delving into uncharted territories within Indian writing in English. Specifically, the exploration extends into the realms of humanism, fiction, and feminism, elucidating how these elements interplay in shaping the lives and experiences of characters like Diksha in the novel. Diksha, a poignant embodiment of modern women grappling with societal expectations, is artfully depicted as she navigates the intricate web of personal sacrifices and societal norms prevalent in a male-dominated milieu. Her poignant struggles underscore the harsh reality faced by many women, who find themselves confined to submissive roles, their aspirations shackled by societal constraints. Amidst these challenges, however, Shenoy beautifully accentuates the theme of individual agency, showcasing Diksha's inspiring journey towards self-realization and empowerment. Vibrant and compelling, the character of Vibha emerges as a beacon of hope and catalyst for change in Diksha's life, igniting a transformative path towards independence and personal fulfilment. Through this thoughtful analysis, the paper not only enriches the discourse on the representation of women in Indian literature but also underscores the critical need to delve deeper into the nuances of this vibrant literary tradition, thereby paving the way for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of gender dynamics and societal constructs.

Index Terms - Wish list, gender equality, submissive, Discontented circumstances, Male supremacy, Existence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Preeti Shenoy, a celebrated author hailing from India, has cemented her status as a literary luminary through her distinguished ability to captivate readers with profoundly engaging narratives that intricately delve into the multifaceted lives of modern women. Her storytelling prowess shines brilliantly as she skillfully unearths the diverse experiences and myriad obstacles that women encounter, effectively shining a revealing light on their everyday challenges. Shenoy's eloquence weaves a masterful tapestry that effortlessly navigates the intricate complexities of female narratives, deftly unveiling the layers that form the very essence of women's existence in today's ever-evolving world. By placing a profound emphasis on the unique voices of women, Shenoy underscores the crucial importance of recognizing and honoring the vibrant diversity of female experiences vividly portrayed through her rich and captivating characters. In a global landscape where discussions on gender equality and women's empowerment take center stage, the deep, meaningful exploration of female stories in literature assumes an elevated significance that resonates powerfully with readers seeking a nuanced understanding of the female experience in society at large.

Preeti Shenoy, an illustrious fiction writer known for her thought-provoking narratives, has garnered acclaim for her compelling stories that intricately explore the intricacies of young women's lives set against a backdrop of societal and familial expectations. With a nod from Forbes as one of the 100 most popular writers in India, Shenoy's evocative portrayals of strong, resilient female characters have earned her a reputation as a literary force to be reckoned with. Critics have lauded her for possessing a "keenly observant mind" and "excellent storytelling skills," attributes that shine through in her realistic and feminist approach to storytelling.

In her debut work, "34 Bubblegum and Candles," Shenoy showcases her storytelling prowess by infusing real-life anecdotes from her own experiences into a tapestry of poignant tales that celebrate the simplicity of life's small pleasures. Each story is a heartfelt reflection of the human experience, each chapter exquisitely crafted to unveil the profound beauty that lies in everyday moments. Through a diverse cast of characters drawn from everyday life, Shenoy skillfully brings to life 34 unique situations, each imbued with its own message of hope and resilience.

Preeti Shenoy, a highly regarded author, has distinguished herself through the success of her second book, "Life Is What You Make It," which has garnered widespread acclaim for its exceptional portrayal of the intricacies of a single woman's life. Shenoy's remarkable talent in crafting unique and captivating characters has resonated deeply with female readers around the world, establishing a strong connection with her audience. Through this novel, she not only entertains but also imparts valuable wisdom on how to lead a fulfilling life, making it a source of inspiration for women from all walks of life. Furthermore, in "Tea for Two and A Piece of Cake," Shenoy masterfully weaves a narrative that delves into the life of an average woman navigating through complex circumstances, elevating a seemingly ordinary story into an extraordinary and compelling tale that leaves a lasting impact on the reader. Through her storytelling prowess, Shenoy continues to captivate audiences and offer insightful reflections on the human experience, solidifying her place as a beloved author cherished by many for her ability to bring to life the depth and complexity of everyday struggles with grace and authenticity.

"The Secret Wish List" intricately weaves the contrasting journeys of two women, while "The One You Can Not Have" delves into the tangled emotions of youth through the perspectives of Aman, Anjali, and Shruti as they navigate their innermost desires. Shenoy's innate ability to capture the essence of human experiences in her writing resonates strongly with her readers, solidifying her reputation as a gifted writer in the literary world. Shenoy holds a strong conviction that for literature to truly make an impact, it must align with the current societal norms and values. Hence, in her literary works, she intricately weaves characters, regardless of their gender, that are intricately linked to the fabric of society. The intricate tapestry she creates in her writing resonates with the intricate nuances of contemporary life, making her stories not just intriguing narratives but also reflections of modern societal dilemmas. What sets her works apart is the depth in which she delves into the sociocultural milieu, presenting readers with thought-provoking scenarios that are not just entertaining but also hold a mirror to the world around us. Scholars and critics alike, even those adhering to the principles of New Historicism, concur that the essence of any artistic creation lies in its intimate connection to the society from which it emerges. This interplay between literature and society is inherent, and it is widely acknowledged that the impact of literature is most potent when it resonates with the pulse of its time. Without this essential resonance with contemporary reality, the very essence of literature starts to wither away. The very essence of literature, according to Shenoy, is the beacon of guidance it provides to readers, offering them insights and reflections to navigate the complexities of the world they inhabit. In the earlier periods of English literature, writers ingeniously captured the essence of contemporary society, weaving vivid depictions that reflected the realities of the time. Their works sought to not only entertain but also to serve as a voice for the marginalized and bring to light pressing social issues that plagued society. Through their narratives, they shed light on themes such as the oppressive dowry system, the tragic practice of child marriage, the harrowing reality of child abuse, and the exploitation of children through labor.

Throughout the annals of literature, novelists have fearlessly exposed the injustices and cruelties inflicted upon females by males, transcending time and societal norms. This enduring trend continues to find resonance in modern literature, where female novelists have emerged as torchbearers of change, introducing the concept of the "new woman" to challenge existing gender roles and stereotypes. Writers like Preeti Shenoy have taken on the mantle of empowering this new archetype through their poignant fiction, crafting narratives that resonate with the struggles and triumphs of the contemporary woman. With each literary work that delves into the complexities of society and human relationships, authors contribute to a rich tapestry of storytelling that not only entertains but also educates and inspires readers to reflect on the social structures and norms that shape our world. By exploring the depths of human

experiences and confronting uncomfortable truths, writers across generations have played a pivotal role in fostering empathy, understanding, and meaningful dialogue within society, ensuring that the legacy of literature continues to be a beacon of enlightenment and empowerment.

Alexandra Kollontai terms new women as –

“They are not the pure nice girls whose romance culminates in a highly successful marriage, they are not the wives who suffer from the infidelities of their husbands, or who themselves have committed adultery, nor are they old maids who bemoan the love of their youth, just as little as they are priestesses of love, the victims of wretched living conditions or of their own depraved nature”

In Preeti Shenoy's works, there is a vivid portrayal of the contemporary woman that resonates with the diverse experiences and intricacies of modern-day existence. Through her characters, Shenoy deftly captures the broad spectrum of women found in present-day society, be it young college students navigating through adulthood, dedicated housewives managing home and family, or ambitious career-driven individuals facing distinct obstacles in their everyday routines. These representations authentically mirror the multifaceted nature of the female experience in today's world.

In the narrative woven by Shenoy, these women are beautifully depicted as transcending the typical stereotypes of being dependent, frustrated, submissive, or conservative. Instead, they emerge as resilient and audacious individuals who boldly tread the path of independence, showcasing a fierce determination to carve out their own identity and fiercely protect their right to exist authentically. Shenoy's literary work serves as a beacon of empowerment, encouraging women to shatter restrictive societal norms that confine them to traditional domestic roles and to passionately advocate for their personal freedoms.

In "The Secret Wish List," a compelling novel by Preeti Shenoy, the author ingeniously delves into the life of a young woman grappling with traditional constraints, eventually yearning for her own sense of freedom. The modern woman, as defined by online sources, is portrayed as someone who bravely challenges outdated societal norms in pursuit of her unique place in the contemporary world. Preeti Shenoy masterfully crafts female characters who embody this definition, showcasing qualities of passion, determination, courage, and independence that enable them to navigate life's challenges with finesse. Throughout the narrative, "The Secret Wish List" sheds light on the struggles faced by women who find themselves bound by the expectations of family and society, with the protagonist Diksha serving as a relatable figure leading an ordinary life. The story initially unfolds with a sense of naturalness, expertly capturing the essence of a typical woman whom we might encounter in our daily lives. Through skillful storytelling, Preeti Shenoy captures the universal yet unique journey of women seeking liberation and self-empowerment in a world that often seeks to confine them.

“Can you change the past? No, you can’t. Your future is in your hands. Our hands. We need goals. Write down yours. No matter how crazy they seem or how unachievable. Do you have anything to lose by doing so?”

Diksha presents herself as a simple housewife diligently carrying out her household duties in a predictable manner, all the while refraining from expressing any discontent towards her husband or family members. It is evident that she derives complete satisfaction from her role as a homemaker. Shenoy, through the character of Diksha, illuminates the darker aspects of society, portraying her as someone who lacks ambition and readily conforms to societal expectations. This stark juxtaposition between the two female characters compels us to reflect on the stark disparity in their circumstances. Despite the passage of time, it is disheartening to acknowledge that little progress has been made in challenging the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that shape the role of women in our society.

“The Secret Wish List” after its introductory narration moves into the flash back where Diksha is the young girl with all her beauty and ambition. As we fully acknowledge the fact that youth is the golden period of life and like all young girls of her age Diksha too thinks of some dreams for her future. It is the time when she is not aware that she is just like all other girls and has to face her destiny. Shenoy is of the view that even in the modern era a female is destined to suffer if she is not strong enough to change her fate, as happens with Diksha. She was enjoying her life with her cousin Tanu, her friend Vibha, her class mate Ankit and her elder brother. Diksha thinks about this bliss of youthfulness never to come to an end. She was busy doing her study, enjoying with her friends, planning for future and other related things and was very far away from the harsh realities of life. Diksha is at a tender age, remains busy in day dreaming. Suddenly one incident that encounters her changes her whole life and makes her realize her position as female in the society.

Preeti Shenoy contemplatively examines this societal phenomenon prevalent in Indian culture: the distinct boundaries that exist for men and women, despite the era of globalization we currently inhabit. Even in the 21st century, where India is being influenced by Western values promoting gender equality, there remains an irony for Indian women who often find themselves restricted in their thoughts and actions. Diksha, a character in Shenoy's narrative, serves as a poignant example of a woman constrained by societal norms, unable to make decisions independently. Despite her youth, talent, and intellect, Diksha's emotional entanglement with her brother's friend, Ankit, becomes a harbinger of her future downfall. Ankit, who frequently visits Diksha's brother, unknowingly becomes the object of Diksha's affections, leading her to grapple with the dilemma of whether or not to express her feelings. Confiding in her best friend, Vibha, Diksha finds solace but remains trapped in a cycle of indecision, awaiting the opportune moment to articulate her emotions. One afternoon, when Ankit and her brother engage in deep conversation, Diksha and her cousin Tanu arrive home from school, inadvertently causing a mix-up that leads to Ankit's bag being misplaced. The ensuing commotion of searching for the lost bag serves as a wake-up call for Diksha, prompting her to rectify her error and return the bag to Ankit, symbolizing a turning point in her emotional journey.

This marked a significant milestone in Diksha's life as she engaged in her first direct conversation with Ankit. Despite the lighthearted nature of their initial interaction, it set the stage for a profound relationship to unfold. Ankit, too, felt a strong attraction towards Diksha; however, both harbored doubts about the potential acceptance of their relationship by society. Undeterred by societal constraints, they defied familial and peer expectations to continue their clandestine rendezvous. Over time, Ankit evolved from a mere acquaintance into an indispensable presence in Diksha's life, as they endeavored to nurture their bond amidst adversity. Their shared quest for moments of togetherness underscored the nascent but promising trajectory their relationship was taking. Unbeknownst to them, a turning point loomed on the horizon, disrupting the tranquility of their evolving romance. Diksha's unexpected nomination for a prestigious science exhibition in a distant city presented an opportunity for prolonged companionship with Ankit. Little did they anticipate that this seemingly innocuous decision would prove to be a harbinger of unforeseen challenges to their once burgeoning relationship, casting a shadow over their shared journey of love and companionship.

It was already quite late in the evening when Diksha finally emerged from her room to rendezvous with Ankit, a meeting that did not escape the watchful gaze of Diksha's vigilant elder brother. In this unfolding scene, Shenoy skillfully illustrates the pervasive influence of societal norms, imposing unwelcome changes on the individuals it touches. Diksha's brother, visibly perturbed by the sight of the two conversing, swiftly took action by imposing a series of stringent restrictions on Diksha, one particularly devastating mandate being the abrupt halt to her education—a decree that reverberated as a shocking blow to her aspirations. Shenoy's poignant narrative serves as a poignant condemnation of the shackles that societal expectations place on women, relegating them to subservient roles. Through the lens of Diksha's brother, Shenoy paints a stark picture of those who view women as devoid of independent agency, denying them the freedom to chart their own destinies. Diksha, despite possessing remarkable intelligence and a relentless work ethic, found herself ensnared by these stifling social constraints, a fate all too common for young women coerced into sacrificing their dreams in the name of familial honor and social standing. In her work 'The Secret Wish List', Preeti Shenoy artfully depicts the tragedy that often defines a woman's life. Through the clever inclusion of the word "secret" in the title, Shenoy ingeniously highlights the gravity of the issues she seeks to address. By choosing this particular word, which connotes mystery and confidentiality, Shenoy masterfully symbolizes the enigmatic nature of a woman's existence. Throughout her life, a woman's future remains shrouded in uncertainty, lacking the autonomy to pursue her own desires and aspirations.

Shenoy's insightful commentary underscores the pervasive societal belief that women are incapable of making decisions for themselves. In a male-dominated world, it is often presumed that women cannot be trusted with the agency to shape their destinies, resulting in their male counterparts dictating the course of their lives. This oppressive pattern is vividly exemplified through the character of Diksha, the female protagonist in Shenoy's narrative. Diksha's plight serves as a poignant illustration of the restrictions imposed upon women by their families and society at large. When her brother unilaterally decides to terminate her education and arrange her marriage prematurely, Diksha is thrust into a world of upheaval and powerlessness. The weight of this unexpected turn of events transforms her from a sensitive young woman into a resigned housewife, resignedly submitting to the whims of her family. The repercussions of Diksha's forced marriage reverberate not only within her own life but also impact those around her. Despite harboring concerns about the potential consequences of her compliance with her family's wishes, Diksha feels compelled to prioritize familial expectations over her own desires, disregarding the potential collateral damage her actions may inflict upon her loved ones.

“She has a job she enjoys, has good help at home, is independent and smart in contrast of dependent woman, everything I am not. So I turn away and busy myself doing the dishes.”

Preeti Shenoy skillfully portrays contrasting depictions of the modern woman in her novel "The Secret Wish List". Through the characters of Diksha and Vibha, she delves into the complexities of womanhood. Initially, Diksha is presented as a shattered woman, a mere puppet controlled by societal expectations. In stark contrast, Vibha emerges as a vibrant, bold representation of womanhood. Following her marriage, Diksha dutifully fulfills her responsibilities as a devoted wife. A significant time leap of twenty-four years reveals a transformed Diksha - now polite, submissive, yet deeply frustrated and content in her role as a wife. Her marriage to Sandeep, a provider who dutifully handles the household's financial matters, lacks the intimacy and affection she craves, emphasizing the loveless nature of their relationship. Preeti Shenoy's narrative sheds light on the profound challenges faced by women, urging readers to contemplate the weight of these issues in women's lives.

She points out that women are solely responsible for their plight as they become so habitual to obey and follow their life partners that they are not even aware of their rights as a human. This situation mirrors the experience of Diksha, who, through consistent engagement in domestic chores, lost touch with her true self and unknowingly succumbed to societal expectations. In stark contrast, the portrayal of Vibha embodies the epitome of a modern woman in the 21st century - independent, proud, bold, and content. Shenoy masterfully showcases Vibha as a liberated individual who navigates life on her own terms, standing as a stark contrast to Diksha's constrained existence.

“We all must really live our lives; we should do what makes us happy. I kept pushing myself in career, as I wanted to prove that I was as good as any man”.

Diksha's journey takes an enlightening turn when she encounters Vibha during a company tour. Vibha's keen observation uncovers the discontent hiding beneath Diksha's mundane routine, shedding light on the imbalance in her life. The reflection provided by Vibha exposes the dominance and self-centered nature of Sandeep, Diksha's husband, who neglects her well-being and emotional serenity, viewing her solely as a support system for his domestic needs.

Vibha's astonishment grows as she notes the absence of intimacy between Diksha and Sandeep, revealing a profound void in their relationship. Through this comparison, Preeti Shenoy guides Diksha towards a realization of her own circumstances, juxtaposing her existence with the vibrant, fulfilling life led by Vibha. The stark contrast prompts Diksha to reflect on her choices and strive for a similar sense of joy, contentment, and personal fulfillment that Vibha effortlessly embodies in her career pursuits and lifestyle choices. After meeting Vibha, Diksha found herself consumed by frustration and disappointment, her dissatisfaction stemming from the realization of the monotonous existence she had endured for years. She began to reflect on the sacrifices she had made for her husband and family, feeling more like a servant than a life partner. However, encountering Vibha sparked a transformative shift in Diksha's perspective and attitude towards life. Despite starting to voice her grievances, Diksha's manner remained subdued. Vibha, recognizing the need for Diksha to prioritize her own desires, urged her to take care of herself.

“Vibha, I am happy. I am happy that my mother-in-law lives close by and we get to visit her. Abhay loves spending time with her. Not everyone is like you. I don't have to get Sandeep to make coffee for me in the name of women's liberation or whatever. He learns well, he provides us with material comfort and so it is indeed okay if I am the one taking care of cooking and everything else.”

Amidst these evolving dynamics, a pivotal moment arose with the sudden passing of Vibha's husband, leaving Diksha in a state of profound sadness and isolation. In her vulnerability, Vibha turned to Diksha for support, revealing the depth of their friendship. When Diksha reached out to Sandeep to share the tragic news and sought his understanding to be by Vibha's side, she was met with unexpected indifference. Sandeep, preoccupied with work, dismissed the urgency of the situation, highlighting the limitations of traditional marital roles that confine women within familial obligations. This dismissive response from Sandeep left Diksha unsettled, prompting a deeper reflection on the shortcomings and constraints of her marriage. As depicted in Preeti Shenoy's novel "The Secret Wish List," the story unravels the hypocrisy and double standards that permeate Indian society, particularly within the expectations of marriage as a sacred bond meant to nurture souls. Diksha's internal turmoil intensified as she grappled with the conflicting desires of living a life true to herself while being entrapped by societal norms. Facing numerous obstacles, Diksha persisted in her journey to support Vibha, embodying the resilience and determination of a modern woman. However, the weight of hopelessness loomed over her as she struggled to navigate the complexities of her evolving relationships and personal aspirations in the face of unexpected challenges.

“She is truly modern, my mother-in-law. She is so practical and correct in her thinking.”

In the current scenario, the modern woman plays various pivotal roles throughout her life journey. Society expects her to possess decision-making capabilities and be able to lead others with confidence. A woman is perceived as the master architect of her own life, capable of designing it in the best possible manner while maintaining a harmonious balance between her personal and professional spheres. The author's portrayal of modern women highlights their zest for life, embracing their individuality, and forging their unique paths towards success. Inspired by Shenoy's depiction of Diksha, the main character, who breaks free from the constraints of married life to pursue her passion for dance. On the other hand, Vibha, her cousin, realizes the importance of spending quality time with her children and loved ones, prompting her to leave her job and relish the joys of family life. Both women exemplify the courage to make transformative decisions that align with their desires, illustrating the essence of modern womanhood. A modern woman is not characterized by sacrificing her dreams due to societal norms or any other constraints; instead, she is a beacon of self-expression, empowered to pursue her aspirations. Diksha's transformation from a submissive and isolated individual after marriage to a self-assured dream-chaser is accentuated by her progressive mother-in-law's unwavering support and encouragement. This narrative exemplifies how united women can create extraordinary outcomes in their lives by nurturing each other and fostering a culture of support and understanding. The significance of reciprocated love, care, and support in a woman's life, as displayed by Diksha's mother-in-law, serves as a reminder that every individual, regardless of gender, thrives when surrounded by compassion and encouragement on their journey towards fulfillment.

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