

# Emerging of ‘New Woman’ from Gender Bias Discrimination in Preeti Shenoy’s “The Secret Wishlist”

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## Abstract

The portrayal of women in Indian writing has been a topic of interest for scholars and readers alike. This paper focuses on Preeti Shenoy's novel "The Secret Wish List" to highlight the excellence of her writing and to explore new areas of Indian writing in English, particularly in the realm of humanism, fiction, and feminism. The novel depicts the struggles of modern women, such as Diksha, who must sacrifice their wishes and aspirations to maintain their family's dignity in a male-dominated society. It shows how women are forced to live in submissive and frustrated conditions, unable to make decisions for their own lives. However, the novel also emphasizes the power of individual agency, as Diksha takes her own decisions and embarks on a journey towards independence and fulfillment. The character of Vibha serves as an inspiration for Diksha, motivating her to make positive changes in her life. Overall, the paper offers a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussions on the representation of women in Indian writing, highlighting the importance of exploring new dimensions of this rich literary tradition.

**Keywords** – Wish list, feminism, submissive and frustrated conditions, male dominated, independent life, equal rights and positions etc.

Preeti Shenoy is a prominent fiction writer who has been nominated for Forbes' list of the 100 most popular writers in India. Her writings delve into the lives of young women who are often subject to societal and familial pressures. Her portrayals are realistic and feminist, leading critics to describe her as possessing a "keenly observant mind" and "excellent storytelling skills." Shenoy's works have ranked her among the top five selling authors in India, with her writing being translated into multiple languages due to their immense popularity. Her readership is drawn to the spontaneous flow of emotion present in all of her works. Millions of readers have found a spontaneous flow of emotions in all of her works. Her first work, "34 Bubblegum and Candles," received an excellent response from readers. In this book, Shenoy uses real-life incidents that have occurred in her life to create a beautiful portrayal of the simple things in life, such as bubblegum and candles, and their deeper meanings. The book is a prime example of Shenoy's craftsmanship, as she brings to life 34 real-life situations through a variety of characters from everyday life.

Preeti Shenoy is an author whose second book, "Life Is What You Make It," has gained widespread acclaim for its extraordinary portrayal of the life of a single woman. Shenoy's ability to create distinct and fascinating characters has endeared her to female readers everywhere. In this novel, she shares her philosophy for leading a good life, making it an inspirational work for women. In "Tea for Two and A Piece of Cake," Shenoy presents the story of an ordinary woman and her complicated life, transforming an everyday struggle into an extraordinary tale. Another one of Shenoy's cherished works

is "The Secret Wish List," which tells the story of two women living very different lives. Finally, "The One You Can Not Have" explores the tumultuous emotions of youth as three characters, Aman, Anjali, and Shruti, grapple with their heart's desires. Overall, Preeti Shenoy is a gifted writer who captures the human experience in a way that resonates with readers.

Shenoy believes that literature must be relevant to contemporary society and its ideas. Therefore, in her novels, she portrays characters - male or female - that are drawn from the social landscape. Many examples of this can be seen in her works, which have relevance to recent society. It is widely accepted that literature and society are two sides of the same coin. Even critics who subscribe to New Historicism agree that every piece of art must be understood and analyzed in close context with its society. Without contemporary relevance, literature cannot survive. The objective of literature is to provide guidance to its readers.

In the earlier periods of English literature, writers drew references from contemporary society to paint a realistic picture. They aimed to draw readers' attention to various social issues, such as the dowry system, child marriage, child abuse, and child labour. Throughout literature, novelists have exposed the mistreatment of females by males of all ages. This trend continues in modern literature, with female novelists coining the term "new women," and Preeti Shenoy empowering this new woman through her fiction...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”**

It is evident from Preeti Shenoy's works that she portrays the contemporary woman in a way that reflects the varied experiences and complexities of modern life. Her characters represent the diverse range of women in today's world, including college girls, housewives, and career-oriented women, all of whom face unique challenges in their daily lives.

In Shenoy's novels, these women are no longer portrayed as dependent, frustrated, submissive, or conservative, but rather as bold and determined individuals who are willing to take significant steps to assert their independence and fight for their existence. Through her writing, Shenoy has become a symbol of reform, inspiring women to break free from the traditional notions of domesticity and fight for their personal liberty.

As Winifred Harper Cooley once said, the greatest achievement of the new women is personal liberty, and Preeti Shenoy's works embody this sentiment perfectly. Her portrayal of the modern woman as an empowered and independent individual has inspired countless women around the world to take charge of their lives and strive for their personal goals and aspirations. In the words of Winifred Harper Cooley;

**“The finest achievement of the new women has been personal liberty”**

**‘The Secret Wish List’** is a prominent novel wherein Preeti Shenoy narrates a story of a young girl traditionally suffocated and later on yelling out for her independence. An online dictionary defines a modern woman as one who is breaking all the bygone rules of a traditional society and searching for her

perfect role in the contemporary world. All the woman characters of Preeti Shenoy fit into this category of the definition of woman. Woman protagonists of Preeti Shenoy are passionate, resolute, bold and uninfluenced in life and are skilled enough to win over any situation of life. **‘The Secret Wish List’** focused upon the plight of a woman being under controlled by her family and her society. The main protagonist Diksha is a lady with common and ordinary life. In the beginning of the story, everything seems to be very natural and quite as Preeti Shenoy introduces to us a common woman whom we are meeting daily in our life. Diksha is appears as a simple house wife doing her duty of the house in a routine manner without even a word of complaint against her husband or her family members and seems fully satisfied being a house wife. Shenoy has introduced the image of the dark side of society through the character of Diksha as one who is too dull and submissive to think good for her life. At this point we are forced to meditate upon the two different just-opposed situations of two woman characters. Even in this era we have not been successful to make a little change in the status of woman in this male dominated 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. Senoy 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 deliberates upon this fact in an Indian society; boundaries are different for male and female, no matter that we are breathing in the age of globalization. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian society is receiving the impact of western culture that advocates giving similar rights to male and female but it is an irony for Indian woman that she is not liberated to think about her. Shenoy’s Diksha is one such victim of contemporary society who is not free to take decision for her life. She is young, talented and intelligent but her emotional attachment with her brother’s friend destroys her future. Ankit as a friend usually visits her brother at regular intervals. She feels attractment towards Ankit as a young girl. Diksha makes many efforts to talk to Ankit and tell him about her attraction but every other time she hesitates and keeps all her emotions in her heart. She used to share her feelings with her best friend Vibha. She was under to be or not to be situation to express her feelings or rather she was waiting for the right moment to come. One day Ankit came to visit her elder brother, both became busy in talking inside the room and left their bags outside. Suddenly Diksha along with her cousin Tanu returned back from the school, saw Ankit busy in talking with her brother and it was coincident that she mistakably put the bag into her room thinking that it was Tanu’s. As soon as Ankit came out, he found his bag missing and everybody in the house was busy in searching the bag but could not find it. After some time Diksha came to realize her mistake and she handed over the bag to Ankit.

This was for the first time when she talked to Ankit directly though it was a funny moment, paves the way for a serious relationship. Ankit too was attracted towards Diksha but both were of the opinion

that nobody would accept their relationship. Still they both continued meeting with each other among all the restrictions of family and friends. Later on Ankit remains no longer a friend to Diksha but he has become a part of her existence and they both try to find out ways to meet and enjoy and life is moving on a smooth path for both of them. Suddenly as it is usual everywhere a tragic blow came into their life. Diksha was nominated for a science exhibition to be held in other city. Both Ankit and Diksha decided to spend longer hours with each other during that camp and were totally unaware that this meeting would be a disaster for their relationship. It was late in the evening when Diksha came out of her room to meet Ankit they both were seen while meeting by Diksha's elder brother. Shenoy here portrayed how the norms of the society put change into the feet of its people. Diksha's brother got so much annoyed that he put several restriction upon Diksha and one of the major restriction which came as a shock to her was to discontinue her education. Here Preeti Shenoy strongly opposed the social bondage which forces a woman to lead her life as a slave. Diksha's elder brother represented those people of the society who consider a woman not to be an independent self and is not free to live the life the way what she wishes for. The same happens with Diksha though she has been an intelligent and laborious girl who deserves a promising future, she was compelled to abandon her studies due to social restrictions. Her family members sacrificed her existence at the altar of social prestige and family reputation.

Preeti Shenoy has satirically depicted the tragedy of woman's life through her work '**The Secret Wish List**'. By introducing the word secret to the title Shenoy strongly commented upon the seriousness of the issue she wanted to raise as the literal meaning of secret is to be mysterious or the thing not meant to be disclosed and the life of the woman is like this only. Everything about her future remained mysterious to her throughout her life and even she is not having independence to chalk out what she wished for. In the regarded opinion of Preeti Shenoy it becomes a set pattern of male dominated society that they thought the females could not be trusted to take the decision for their lives and every time it is their male counterparts who took decision for their lives. This phase of a woman's life could be understood more clearly with reference to female protagonist Diksha. All of a sudden her brother not only decided to abdicate her studies but also fixed her marriage at an early age. The decision of the marriage came as a double blow to Diksha and this incident changed her whole attitude towards her life. A sensitive girl converted into a serious housewife and surrendered herself fully to the wishes of her family members. She did not even bother what would happen to the life of Ankit if she moves forward on her family's decision in her life.

As it was mentioned earlier that Preeti Shenoy depicts two different images of the modern woman in the novel '**The Secret Wish List**', through the character of Diksha firstly she presented the image of a shattered woman who is just like a puppet in the hand of the society and the other one is the image of Vibha which represents a colourful and bold image of woman. After her marriage Diksha is fulfilling all her duties and responsibilities like a devoted wife. The story takes a long gap of twenty four years when Diksha is no longer the same girl. Her personality has gone through a big change and she is depicted now as a polite, submissive, frustrated yet responsive and contented wife. Diksha was married to Sandeep and now she is having a son Abhaya. Sandeep is working in a good company and take good care of all financial affairs of the house but is not having any intimacy and love for Diksha what he is doing for her is a part of duty as a husband. It was an irony of Diksha's life that she was leading a loveless married life with her husband Sandeep. With '**The Secret Wish List**', Preeti Shenoy also draws the attention towards the grave nature of woman's issues. 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. Same condition is faced by Diksha as she did all domestic works so consistently that she did not even realize her real self in the life. She herself says;

**“Other than being a wife and a mother, I truly am nothing” [31]**

The second is the image of Vibha who represents the true modern woman of 21<sup>st</sup> century who is working in a company and Shenoy portrays her as independent, proud, bold and happy woman. She possesses the spirit of a liberated woman of modern era as she is free to live the way she wants and free to do whatever she wishes and appears as a foil to Diksha’s character.. Diksha was not able to realize her imperfection till she did not meet Vibha. On a company tour Vibha came to meet Diksha where Vibha saw Diksha’s dull and routine life and immediately she recognized that there was some unpleasant with her life situations. She was unable to understand why Diksha surrendered herself to the wishes of her family without any complaint. She noticed Sandeep as a dominated person who is fully self centered and egoistic who did not even care about Diksha’s well being and mental peace considered Diksha only as one who supported him in all domestic needs. Vibha was much surprised to notice about the absence intimate relationship between husband and wife. Here Preeti Shenoy makes Diksha realize her own circumstances when she compares her life with that of Vibha and finds that Vibha was leading a happy, blissful and satisfied life, doing a job and visiting the places she wished. After meeting Vibha Diksha became frustrated and disappointed with the kind of life she had been leading for years and condemned herself for works she had to do for her husband and family members and got treatment as a maid servant not as a life partner. After meeting Vibha a change came in Diksha’s notion and attitude to life and now she started complaining but still in a submissive way. Vibha encourages Diksha to care of her desire –

**“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”. (Page 74)**

It is the juncture where situations are taking a rapid move; the last blow came to Diksha when she heard the news of death of Vibha’s husband. At this sad and lonely moment Vibha asked for Diksha’s support. When Diksha informed Sandeep about the death of Vibha’s husband, she hoped that he would console her and ask her to go to Vibha at this crucial moment, but it is to her surprise that Sandeep acted in the most unexpected manner as he neither asked Diksha to go to her friend nor did he allow her for the same. Through this chapter Preeti Senoy depicted a conventional Indian marriage setup where the husband did not liberate a woman to think beyond their family. Sandeep ignored the emergency of the situation and told Diksha that he was much busy with his presentation and if Diksha would go to Bangalore, who would be taking care of Abhaya. This insensitive behavior of Sandeep surprised Diksha and made her so much disturbed that she lost control over her mind and was compelled to think about the rudeness and futility of her marriage life. Through ‘**The Secret Wish List**’ the author illustrates the hypocrisy of Indian society by pinpointing towards the double standards of society where marriage is acknowledged to be the companionship to souls. Here in this novel ‘**The Secret Wish List**’ the main character is seemingly obtaining no right to live her life according to her wishes and even the list of dreams she has to prepare secretly. Diksha went to meet Vibha after crossing many hurdles, as she is reflecting the image of a modern woman she became successful in every trial. When she got the sad news through that night she thought of various schemes to support Vibha but she became very disparate when she found herself in a hopeless situation. Being a traditional housewife she could not escape from her domestic responsibilities but she thought of handing over her child Abhaya to his classmate’s parents

to take care. It was not possible for her to leave her child all alone at late night but as a modern woman she did not lose hope and courage and now she determined to change the meaning of her life for herself.

Preeti Shenoy has narrated this revolutionary step of Diksha in a well skilled and balanced manner. Modern woman does not mean that woman who ignores all moral and ethical values to pursue her dreams but her wings are deep rooted to tradition and values. As it happened in case of Diksha that she took steps forward but she did not lose her association to her roots of value. It might be a very difficult situation for Diksha to chose between Sandeep and Ankit. Diksha decides to explain her emotional block to her husband that is indeed a wise step by Diksha to prove Sandeep that she is a human being other than simply a wife and a mother but Sandeep as being an insensitive person did not reacted in a positive manner. Diksha stated his reaction in her words to her friend in a desperate manner that after listening her secret wishes he reacted as if she would have slapped him on his face or rather he was reacting as if she desired to dance in front of public. The reaction of Sandeep made Diksha more expressive and determined and she now decided to find her own voice and put to an end to all tragedies of life by the end of the novel Diksha learned to put off all her miserable life and start a fresh life with a partner Gaurav an academy for her future. Shenoy has become successful in presenting the shades of modern woman through the character of Diksha and also Vibha who never surrenders but encounters with the odds of life. As LinkedIn survey defines a modern woman's success –

**“First comes career, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage. For nearly three quarters of women (74%) worldwide, this is the order in which they measure accomplishment. Over the years, however, the female mindset is changing from housewife to boardroom member, as women in the workplace seek to have it all in life – continuing to climb the corporate ladder with family in tow”.**

Preeti Shenoy has made efforts to point out the connectivity with feminine spirit of women and this paper is based on nature of feminist protagonists matriarchal society, women's nature of motherhood and women's position in society are well scrutinized in Preeti Shenoy's selected novels. To conclude the paper has made an attempt to deal with a view of feminine in the theory of feminism in relation to Shenoy. It ferrets out the connectivity of rejuvenating the feminine in Shenoy's fiction perspectives. Future research will have a discovery on psychoanalysis of women, marginalization of women, patriarchy and motherhood of women etc.

In the current scenario the modern woman plays multiple important roles in their life journey. As in society people expect that a woman must have the capability of making decisions, she must have the capacity of leading others. She can be the architect of her own life and design her life as she wants in best possible manner and she can also maintain a superb balance in between her personal and professional life. So how the author mirrored the modern women is that a modern woman loves to enjoy her life to the fullest she enjoys her individuality and so they are the one who carve their own path by themselves in order to be successful. As per Shenoy's portrayal of Diksha the main character she comes out of the duties of married life, to fulfill her dream of making her career in the field of dance. And Vibha, her cousin, feels that she is losing something by not getting sufficient time for her children and loved ones so she decides to quit her job and now enjoys the company of her children and family. So in this way both the women made desirable changes in their lives to live their life to the fullest in their

desired way of life. So a modern woman is able to listen to her inner calling and she is also able to act upon her calling and they mould their lives accordingly, as her mother-in-law says -

**“She is truly modern, my mother-in-law.**

**She is so practical and correct in her thinking.” [Page 81]**

So in my view, a modern woman is not a woman who is sacrificing their dreams because of the fear of society or for any other reason. In Spite of this she is a self -expressing woman who can express herself and achieve what she desires. Diksha was very submissive and isolated after her marriage with Sandeep but her mother-in-law had also an identity of new woman and her support to Diksha is very surprising and unique kind of thing that mother in law is standing on the side of her daughter-in-law holding her hand on the path of her dream and criticizing the obsolete ideology of her arrogant son. Thus united women can make miracles in their life. Everyone expects that a woman can give love and care and they corner for everyone but nobody cares that a woman also needs love care and support in her life as provided by Diksha's mother in law in her life.

So modern woman loves to explore her life and by that she comes to know that what she actually wants from her life. So really Shenoy mirrored modern woman in a real sense and not on the terms of society. Modern woman is not that who is professional or established but that who is really happy in her life whether it's personal life or professional life. To conclude the author Preeti Shenoy is really giving us that how we can come to this decision that we are modern or not, are we still trading on old paths and carrying the image of self- sacrificing women or we are ready to be self-expressing women.

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