

THE ROLE OF MEN IN FACILITATING WOMEN'S PATHWAYS TO INDEPENDENCE IN THE WORKS OF PREETI SHENOY

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*A Study of Selected Novels of Preeti Shenoy***

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolving representation of men as supportive allies in women's journeys toward independence in the novels of Preeti Shenoy. While Shenoy's works foreground female protagonists who struggle with emotional, professional, and social constraints, the narratives also portray male characters who challenge patriarchal structures by encouraging autonomy, respecting personal choices, and nurturing confidence. Drawing on liberal feminist theory and contemporary gender-discourse, the study analyzes *Life Is What You Make It*, *The Secret Wish List*, *It Happens for a Reason*, and *A Hundred Little Flames* to understand how Shenoy redefines masculinity as empathetic, egalitarian, and growth-oriented. Through close textual readings, the paper argues that Shenoy's portrayal of supportive men plays a crucial role in expanding women's agency and contributes to a broader literary shift towards collaborative gender relationships in modern Indian fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature has historically depicted women as constrained by family expectations, social conventions, and rigid gender roles. Contemporary women novelists, however, have challenged these limitations by foregrounding women's personal aspirations and struggles for self-definition. Among them, Preeti Shenoy has gained recognition for portraying emotionally complex and relatable female protagonists who navigate societal pressures while seeking independence and fulfillment.

While much of the existing scholarship highlights Shenoy's representation of women, little attention has been given to how her male characters contribute to female empowerment. This paper addresses that gap by examining the ways in which men act not as obstacles but as facilitators of independence in Shenoy's fiction. The study argues that these portrayals reflect shifting gender dynamics in modern Indian society and contribute to a more progressive literary discourse.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism emphasizes individual freedom, equality, and the dismantling of unjust gender-based barriers. It encourages mutual respect between genders and advocates for men's participation in promoting women's autonomy. This framework is particularly suited to Shenoy's novels, which portray independence as a combination of personal agency and supportive relationships.

2.2 Contemporary Gender-Role Theory

Gender roles are evolving, and modern literature increasingly presents men as emotionally expressive, compassionate, and respectful of women's ambitions. Shenoy's male characters embody these emerging forms of masculinity.

2.3 Narrative and Character Theory

Close reading and character analysis help uncover how interpersonal dynamics drive women's self-realization. The male characters' dialogue, actions, and emotional support create environments that help female protagonists grow.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Preeti Shenoy's work has been examined primarily through themes of emotional healing, women's empowerment, and the psychological challenges faced by contemporary youth. Scholars highlight her ability to connect personal struggles with social realities. However, most studies focus on female experiences alone.

Research on men as allies in feminist literature remains limited, especially in Indian popular fiction. Hence, this paper contributes new insights by analyzing male characters not as patriarchal figures, but as catalysts for women's autonomy.

4. MEN AS SUPPORTIVE ALLIES IN SHENOY'S NOVELS

4.1 Life Is What You Make It: Emotional Support as Empowerment

Ankita's journey through mental-health struggles and self-discovery reveals the significance of male support without domination. Abhishek and Joseph provide emotional grounding.

Abhishek encourages Ankita's creative abilities, treats her ambitions seriously, and never questions her right to choose her future.

Joseph, her therapist, supports her healing process while respecting her independence, illustrating the role of men in providing non-judgmental, professional, and emotional assistance.

These figures counter traditional narratives where men control women's decisions; instead, they enable Ankita to reclaim her life with dignity and strength.

4.2 The Secret Wish List: Encouragement to Break Social Conformity

This novel vividly portrays the conflict between traditional marital expectations and personal desires.

Diksha's friend, Ankit, becomes a key figure in her transformation. He listens without judgement, validates her suppressed aspirations, and motivates her to rebuild confidence long lost in a restrictive marriage.

Ankit's supportive behavior challenges the idea that male-female relationships inevitably reinforce patriarchy. Instead, Shenoy constructs a healthy bond rooted in respect and empathy, empowering Diksha to pursue the independence she had been denied.

4.3 It Happens for a Reason: Respecting Motherhood and Individuality

Vee, the protagonist, raises her daughter single-handedly and deals with social stigma and isolation.

Suchit, an understanding and respectful male character, supports Vee emotionally and professionally. He treats her identity as a mother not as a burden but as a strength, helping her rebuild her career.

Suchit's role demonstrates how men can help women reclaim lost opportunities without overshadowing their agency.

4.4 A Hundred Little Flames: Intergenerational Male Support

Although the novel focuses on a grandfather-grandson relationship, it subtly highlights supportive masculinity.

The older male perspective emphasizes empathy, patience, and listening—qualities that challenge rigid stereotypes.

The younger male protagonist learns to value emotional expression and respect for personal stories, creating a model of compassionate masculinity.

These portrayals suggest that supportive men exist across generations and that emotional sensitivity is an essential tool for enabling women's independence.

5. DISCUSSION

Across the novels, Shenoy constructs a literary world where male characters play active roles in supporting women's independence. These men do not dominate or direct women's lives; instead, they:

Respect women's choices

Encourage personal growth

Provide emotional or professional help without expectation

Validate ambitions and dreams

Challenge social norms that restrict women

Offer compassion instead of judgement

This representation reflects a larger cultural shift in India, where modern relationships are slowly moving towards partnership rather than hierarchy.

Shenoy's portrayal of supportive masculinity contributes to feminist conversations by showing that gender equality is not a struggle women must face alone. Collaboration, empathy, and respect from men become essential components of women's empowerment.

6. CONCLUSION

Preeti Shenoy's novels demonstrate that women's independence is not solely an individual achievement but is often strengthened by positive and supportive male relationships. By depicting men as empathetic, respectful, and encouraging, Shenoy challenges traditional patriarchal models and proposes a more balanced and humane understanding of gender relations. Her fiction offers a hopeful vision of society where men and women grow together, enabling each other's dreams rather than limiting them.

This study thus contributes to the broader discourse on feminist literature by emphasizing the significance of supportive masculinity in women's journeys toward self-reliance and fulfillment.

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