



THE IMAGE OF NEW WOMAN MIRRORED IN MODERN INDIAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The image of woman in fiction has undergone a radical change in the 21st century. The Indian woman writers have moved away from portraying a traditional self-sacrificing woman toward a self-expressive individual woman. The chaste, patient, self-denying, dependant woman is no longer a female lead. Instead, the female characters are projected to be successful in their quest for identity and individuality. A number of women writers have made their debut in 1990s, generating novels which revealed the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women. The work of Indian women writers has been undervalued, as they write about the enclosed domestic space and moreover, a female's notion of it. However, Indian women writers have later shown their worth in the field of literature producing novels and other works reflecting the society, inner conflicts of a personality, a whole range of attitudes and diverse complexities. They started questioning the prominent old patriarchal domination. Women's presentation has become more assertive, more liberated in their view and more articulate in expression than the woman of the past is. The Indian women writers have perfectly been playing their role in representing the modern day woman as well as in guiding and supporting them. This paper focuses on the works of Preethi Shenoy; her contribution to literature and thereby to the society.

Key words: women writers, modern Indian fiction, female leads, literature

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is a reflection of society and society is mirrored in literature. The contemporary writers draw their characters from the society; and their plots from the real life incidents. They will then be able to strike a chord with their readers. Preethi Shenoy is one such author who projects the 'New Woman' in her novels.

Preethi Shenoy is an Indian author, consistently nominated for the Forbes List of the 100 most influential celebrities of India since 2013. She has penned 5 novels till now—Life Is What You Make It (2011), Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake (2012), The Secret Wish List (2012), The One You Cannot Have (2013) and It Happens For A Reason

(2014). *Daily News and Analysis* has described her as a 'Keenly observant mind' and *Times of India* describes her writing as 'Excellent story telling skills'. [1] She puts her philosophy 'Live life to the fullest' in simple writing which has earned her a large number of readership.

This paper particularly deals with a few of her woman characters that stand as a replica of today's new generation woman. Be it a college girl or a housewife or a career-oriented woman or a single mother, the character in her novel is an image of the 'New Woman'. She is no longer a conservative, oppressed, dependant woman who accepts life the way it comes to her. Instead, she is a

woman who 'designs' her life, the way she wants it to be.

A 'New Woman' alias a 'Modern Woman' as defined by Merriam-Webster online dictionary is- 'A woman especially of the late 19th century actively resisting traditional controls and seeking to fill a complete role in the world.' [2] Shenoy's women characters fit well into this definition and even go beyond it. They are passionate about life, determined towards their careers, independent, bold and unfettered. They quench their thirst of identity with a quest for individuality.

No more than two generations ago, a girl was expected to abandon her academic pursuits and assume the role of a housewife. She would completely devote herself to cook, clean, look after the house, raise her children and serve her husband. [3] As time has progressed, there is a change in the mindset of women with the change in social and economical aspects. They started their quest for individuality and personal identity, shoving aside the traditional self-sacrificing and self-denying woman. According to Winifred Harper Cooley, 'The finest achievement of the new woman has been personal liberty'. [4] This liberty opportune her to make decisions in life and lead it without needlessly bowing to irrational customs and traditions.

Alexandra Kollontai terms new woman —

They are not the pure, "nice" girls whose romance culminates in a highly successful marriage, they are not wives who suffer from the infidelities of their husbands, or who themselves have committed adultery. Nor are they old maids who bemoan the unhappy love of their youth, just as little as they are "priestesses of love," the victims of wretched living conditions or of their own depraved natures. [5]

They are the bold, dynamic women who 'live' their life as they desire. They 'choose' for themselves whether to lead a professional life or to be a homemaker or to balance both. They 'decide' whether to walk out of a relation or to walk with her man. This tremendous change in the mindset of today's woman is unimaginable a decade ago. The focus here is on how independent and self-satisfied the characters are.

It Happens for a Reason

Vipasha, the protagonist of 'It Happens for a Reason' [6], is bold enough to give birth to a baby out of wedlock. She does two jobs to raise her son as a single mother. She has no inhibitions in talking about 'forbidden' matters, as per the societal norms, between a mother and a son.

There is nothing in the world that I don't discuss with Aryan. He chats with me freely on all subjects. Even about sex. [P 8]

We see a lot of confidence spilling out in her words, though it may seem arrogance to others. She goes with her decisions and is very particular about what should happen in her life.

"This is my decision and I am sticking to it, no matter what." [P xii]

I do want to share the rest of my life with someone, but only if he is the right guy. I definitely don't want a guy just for the sake of it... If I decide to do so, he has to be completely worth it. [P 9]

She exhibits her self-respect and states that she doesn't want to depend on anyone, not even on her parents.

I nodded. But I was certain that I would never use my parents' money... This was one thing I was determined about. [P124]

The following words show that Vipasha is a mentally strong woman who could handle any tough situation—

I am in a total state of shock and yet am able to operate calmly. It is like I have split into two people—one has taken complete control and the other has collapsed in grief. [P 23]

Vipasha and her friend Suchi exchange a few dialogues in a context—

'We all crave our own paths, Suchi, and I have chosen mine.'

A path where you have thrown away a promising career, dropped out of college, have a baby, and have no visible job prospects. [P 138]

And then, Vipasha states how important her decisions are to her and how she is going to continue with her life, the aftermath of her 'unconventional' choices—

I told her with firmness that I was clear about what I wanted, and yes, I knew that they might not be conventional choices... But they were important to me and I was sticking to them.[P 138]

Preethi Shenoy has been successful in portraying a 'New Woman' in the name of Vipasha, a bold woman who has chosen an unconventional path and is ready to face the consequences, who stands firm on her decisions and who takes pride in earning her income. A confident, mentally strong, self-dependant and brave woman all rolled into one suits perfectly to the opinion given by Alexandra Kollontai in "New Woman"—

The "single woman": in the most recent past the original type of woman was the "spouse," the wife who was the shadow of the husband, a supplement, an appendage. The single woman has ceased to play this subordinate role and to be no more than the reflex of the man. She has a singular inner world, full of general human interests, she is independent inwardly and self-reliant outwardly.[7]

The Secret Wish List

This paper further studies three characters from 'The Secret Wish List' [8] — the protagonist Diksha, her cousin Vibha and Diksha's mother-in-law. Diksha and Vibha are cousins who resemble two extreme ends. Diksha is a timid house wife, who toils the entire day but is taken for granted. She is a meek doormat, a submissive and dependent wife who is scared of her husband. She could not even imagine expressing herself in front of him. Diksha is contented and accustomed to this life until Vibha forces her to find out her desires and asks her to try to fulfil them.

We all must really *live* our lives, Diksha. 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. [P 74]

Diksha compares herself with Vibha—

She is leading the life she wants. She has a job she enjoys, has good help at home, is independent and smart, everything I am not. [P 11]

She undergoes a lot of psychological trauma which she has deliberately suppressed for long. Her growing dissatisfaction and vacuum in life is put into words—

"I want something more from my life. I want to do something about it." [P 16]

"I usually read after that to make my mind off the niggling feeling that if our society was as conscious of women's rights as they were in the west, what Sandeep did would probably be construed as marital rape... But I do my duty as a wife." [P 62]

"I think about how I have gone along and been a 'good girl' all this while, doing exactly what my parents wanted me to do. I have dutifully married a 'suitable boy', dutifully produced a child and have busied myself raising him... in all these years, I have completely lost track of what I want. I have played the role of wife and mother to perfection. So much so that I have forgotten what I want as an individual. My identity is truly Sandeep's wife or Abhay's mother." [P 16]

"Other than being a wife and a mother, I truly am nothing." [P 31]

Sandeep is an insensitive husband who has no emotions. He is so conservative, selfish and cold. He even decides his wife's clothes, what to wear and what not to wear. He doesn't share an emotional bond, neither with his mother, nor his wife or his son. When Diksha tries to express her trauma and emptiness, he becomes shell shocked. His reaction in Diksha's words—

"He looks at me as though I have slapped him." [P 3]

"He looks at me as though I have just confessed my desire to become a strip dancer." [P 31]

Diksha turns out to be so expressive by the end of the novel. She gains confidence and ultimately finds her voice. She puts an end to her submissive nature and decides her future for herself —

"I have found my calling in salsa. It is something I yearn for, something I am good at and something I want to pursue as a career. And guess what? I am going to go

ahead with it. Gaurav and I opening our own academy, as equal partners.” [P 252]
The girl who led her life to satisfy her parents, her husband and family and has been nothing other than that, transforms into a confident and expressive woman who finally designs her life as she wanted it to be. This is where Preethi Shenoy has successfully presented a new woman. Maya in Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock* undergoes severe psychological trauma and the story has a tragic end. But Preethi Shenoy’s Diksha takes the control over her life, decides to leave her husband and chooses her path for a happy life thereafter.

Vibha is a modern woman who prefers career to family. According to LinkedIn survey, a modern woman’s success can be defined as—

‘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.’[9]

Vibha is one such woman who runs the show. She later repents for not having spent enough time with her family. So, she makes amendments and takes the situation under her control. With this character Preethi Shenoy clearly states that a woman can build her life and go on, be it personally or professionally. In complete contrast to Diksha, Vibha longs to spend time with and for family and hence quits her job. She finds peace in doing mundane household chores. She starts to take care of her family and enjoys life. With this character Preethi Shenoy would like to say that a woman has to know what her calling is and has to go in that direction making amendments in life. This is another dimension of a new woman.

Women are adaptable and this has no age limit. The change in mindset of today’s woman is not seen only in the younger generation but also in the elderly ones. An exemplary character to this is Diksha’s mother-in-law. In Diksha’s words—

“She is truly modern, my mother-in-law. She is so practical and correct in her thinking.” [P 81]

She is adaptable to the changes in the society and has a positive outlook. She is an understandable lady who supports and encourages her daughter-in-law when she wants to learn salsa dance.

“You must take the qualifying exams... No knowledge is ever wasted.” [P 232]

She accepts that people should change according to the changes in the society, and that it’s not wise to stick to conservative thoughts.

“People have to change with changing times.” [P 81]
She has empathy for Diksha and shares her experiences and views on women freedom when Diksha voices out her feelings—

“You know, I felt much the same way. I too got married to Sandeep’s father, way too early. I have never ever lived my life or done things for myself. But that was okay for women of that generation. Certainly not of your generation.” [P 122]

She is not happy with the narrow mindedness of her son. She also observes detachedly, who is on the wrong side. She feels bad for her son’s curt and cold nature, his insensibility and his orthodox thoughts. She says to her grandson —

“I wish your papa had half your sense.” [P 232]

She repents for her son’s narrow minded and self-centric nature—

“Sadly, my son is selfish idiot. I erred in raising him.” [P 120]

“I really think that my son should broaden his view a little... he has dug his own grave.”[P 253, 254]

She is the one who stands by her daughter-in-law when she wants to walk away from her son. This is a peculiar depiction of a new woman who could understand the emotions of her daughter-in-law and supports her in her decision. This dimension is new to society and it takes us all by surprise.

Preethi Shenoy, in her novels, presents women with cosmopolitan touch. She makes great effort to maintain that special and unique qualities in her characters. A combination of skills, abilities, flaws and emotions make her characters. She doesn’t anyway support the unethical or immoral

nature, but assures that they are no longer considered to be sins and also suggests ways to come out of such pits. She has been playing her role in the society by injecting modernism to the readers through her characters. She herself stands as a live example for modern woman, who enlightens her readers with her articles in news papers and also helps her audience to leave the inhibitions while discussing the delicate matters openly. [10]

Conclusion

In today's society, a new woman is considered to be the one who doesn't fall into orthodox circles, who is independent of thought, who is capable of making decisions, who is able to lead others, who is willing to guide others and above all who designs her life to the best. The need of the hour is to redefine the 'new woman' as a physically, mentally, intellectually and spiritually strong woman, who balances both the personal and professional life, and lives her life to the best instead of exhibiting modernism in attire and life style.

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