

A Novel of Triumph over Destiny: Alienation and Hope in Preeti Shenoy's *Life is What You Make It*

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Abstract. The present article aims at exploring how 'Alienation' and 'hope' in the fictional work of Preeti Shenoy is the heart of the matter. The word, 'hope' provides a tiny ray of positive note that eliminates all obscurity and disenchantment. When alienation begets misery, parting, anguish and disintegration, hope gives an optimistic note and a spirit of life and joy. 'Hope' begets love for life. Preeti Shenoy is popularly known for her treatment of the theme of motivation and inspiration. The title of Preeti Shenoy's novel, *Life is What You Make it* connotes the idea of a life that is under one's own control. Shenoy's Ankita becomes physically and psychologically isolated due to her guilty consciousness. Though her physical and mental state pulls her towards death and decay, she ultimately triumphs over fate and destiny. The center of attention in this paper is the inner journey of alienation through powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. The present study focuses on the journey of these five steps of 'alienation' in the life of Ankita as well as this study develops the notion of optimism that protects Ankita's life in Shenoy's novel, *Life is What You Make it*.

Keywords : Powerlessness; meaninglessness; normlessness; isolation and self-estrangement.

Preeti Shenoy, one of the bestseller Indian English women novelists of the twenty first century is popularly known for her treatment with the theme of motivation and inspiration. Shenoy's novel, *Life Is What You Make It* literally suggests the notion of optimism, as it connotes the idea of authority over one's own life. 'Alienation' and 'hope' are the two conflicting ideas. The first one contains despair, separation, suffering and fragmentation, whereas the latter gives a positive note and an essence of life and joy. The literal meaning of the word, 'alienation' is a withdrawal nature or a kind of estrangement. Any disappointment or any disastrous event causes a person's emotional estrangement or alienation. Such emotional estrangement causes disease and death. Like a slow poison it destroys the inner strength and power. Thus, the person inclines towards the end of life and the person faces death before the physical death. As

a theoretical term, Alienation can be defined through some several states of mind such as powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. The word, hope provides a tiny ray of light that removes all darkness and disappointment. If 'alienation' hastens the death and decay, 'hope' enlightens one's life. Hope begets the love for life. When they two exist in a novel or in any character, it conveys a message of a positive note and an optimistic spirit. Separation, isolation, alienation and fragmentation are very common in the contemporary life. Therefore, the more people accept the trends easily, the more people will be able to save life. The title of Preeti Shenoy's novel, *Life is What You Make it* gives a positive note, as it focuses on the idea of the control over one's own life. The present paper has intended to focus on the triumph over a character's fate and destiny.

Being a novelist of the contemporary period of the twenty first century, Preeti Shenoy manifests the reflection of the current trends of the society in her literary works. Modern era is entitled with the term, separation or fragmentation. Fragmentation sometimes invites disappointment and disaster, whereas, it also opens a new path of living due to positive vibes of life. however, there are four main objectives in the paper. First, this study aims at to analyze Preeti Shenoy's novel, *Life is What You Make it* from the aspect of a triumph over destiny. Secondly, it points out the curved journey of a depressed and helpless Ankita towards a positive and vibrant Ankita. Thirdly, it identifies the state of meaninglessness and isolation in the character of Ankita. Finally, this paper discovers how the theory of 'Alienation' is worthy to analyze the intuitive journey of Ankita.

The term 'Alienation' is coined by Karl Marx in the Marxist theory. Karl Marx has used the term in the sociological aspects. The social critic Jackson has mentioned Marx and his theory of Alienation in his book *The Alienation of the Individual from Society: A Social-Psychological Theory and Cross Cultural Comparison* :

Marx viewed the individual's alienation in several ways: 1) as an alienation from his self, 2) as an alienation from his labor, 3) as an alienation from his product; and 4) as an alienation from others. We are not so much interested in one through as we are in four, i.e., the alienation from others, although the same basic self-

processes are involved in all of them.
(Jackson, 31)

Among these four types of alienation, the last one is very much relevant in the present context. Alienation from others or separation from others creates a great impact upon the human psychology. Human beings are called social animals. Belongingness plays a pivotal role in the lives of human beings. Detachment occurs slowly and follows few steps one by one. In the essay, "On the Meaning of Alienation" Seeman Melvin points out that Alienation encompasses Powerlessness, Meaninglessness, Normlessness, Isolation, and Self estrangement.

Ankita in *Life is What You Make It* suffers from bipolar disorder. During her adolescent period, she gets emotionally attached with more than one opposite sex. One person's death torments her psychologically, as she suffers from guilty for refusing that person's love proposal. Again she is caught by her parents who discover the love letter sent by that very boy. She starts isolating herself from the rest of the world and suffers an endless misery psychologically, "The meaningfulness of social relationships plays a central role in our analysis of social isolation because it is precisely the thing which bridges the gap between a person who is well integrated structurally but still feels lonely" (Parigi, 20). The more she becomes solitary, the more she suffers. Her mental turmoil results her physical sickness. She finds no meaning of being alive. She embraces an inner blankness and a complete void. She detaches the connections with her college, friends and even with her parents :

If belonging is connectedness, then social isolation is the distancing of an individual, psychologically or physically, or both, from his or her network of desired or needed relationships with other persons. Therefore, social isolation is a loss of place within one's groups. The isolation may be voluntary or involuntary. In cognitively intact persons, social isolation can be identified as such by the isolate. (Biordi, 85)

Anita Desai is also popularly known for her treatment of the women psychology and the theme of isolation and alienation. Desai's Monisha in the novel, *Voices in the City* suffers from an endless mental dilemma, as she fails to revolt back and accepts everything silently. Not only

Monisha becomes the victim of alienation in Desai's pen, but also all other characters feel the same tormenting situation of isolation physically or psychologically. In an article, "A Study of Alienation Representing Female Characters in Anita Desai's Novels", Prem Bahadur Khadka says:

Her work focuses on alienating the human being from the world of "absurd", its consequent alienation from a "standard" society. His recognition of the world as a hostile and meaningless person fragmented and spiritually destroyed by life's social circumstances. All the characteristics in her novellas, such as Maya, Nirode, Amla, Monisha, Sita, Sarah and Uma are physically and mentally isolated. (Khadka, 108)

Like Anita Desai, Preeti Shenoy also want to bring a drastic change in the male dominated society where women characters silently suffer a lot. However, unlike Desai's characters, Shenoy's characters struggle hard till they possess their own existence or identity. In the novel, *Life is What You Make It* Ankita moves towards the social isolation, though finally, she takes an unexpected turn. Now the most important question is how Ankita deals with the social circumstances. Does she embrace the deteriorated state? Does she fight against the negative energy to triumph over destiny?

I began avoiding all human contact. I did not want to run into anybody from my residential complex. I did not want to make conversation with anybody or explain why I was not going to college anymore. I lived in constant terror of meeting people and facing people. I did not want anymore to see me in this state. (*Life is What You Make It*, 150)

The above quoted words denote the notion of alienation that causes separation and isolation from the social surroundings. The term alienation is loaded with several social and psychological aspects. A person becomes psychologically alienated, when he/she confined himself/herself within one's own self. Again a person becomes socially alienated, when he/she restricts himself/herself within some people at home. In *Life is What You Make it* Ankita, the female protagonist is one of the victims of

the social and psychological alienation. At certain stage of her life she feels the emptiness, blankness and vacuum within herself. She behaves strangely and leads her life purposelessly. She finds nowhere to go. Helpless Ankita confines herself within her bedroom and she suffers from endless negative thoughts, "I felt completely useless. Even little things seemed impossible to do now. I felt stupid, dumb and totally inadequate. All I seemed to be able to do lie in my bed from morning to night. It was the only thing that I was capable of doing. It was as though the light that was inside me had gone out"(145).She considers herself worthless and useless. Her tongue-tied behavior hampers the peace at home and her parents are in troubled as they catch Ankita at the moment of her suicidal attempt. According to Ankita, "I was a burden not only on my parents but also on my own self. My existence was completely pointless. There was only one way out of this mess and that was to end my own life" (151).

Preeti Shenoy depicts the psychological turmoil of Ankita that leads her towards a void. She finds no destination and she finds no meaning of her life. A constant battle is going on within her mind. She fails to hide the depths of despair that causes "trapped, cornered, exasperated"(Shenoy, xiii). The novelist has narrated the intuitive journey in *Life is What You Make it*, It was the beginning of a sharp curve, a painful detour, a journey that would lead me completely away from my destination, to the edge of a cliff. A journey that would almost take my life, destroy me completely, suck the life force out of me and then toss me away as an empty shell"(130). The situation becomes more complicated and thorny with the passage of time. "A sinking feeling of abandonment" (159) causes sickness in her mind as well as in her health. She becomes ill and she loses her strength owing to her deeply rooted disappointment and frustration. Her physical condition compels her to visit a doctor. However, the novel ends with her successful effort of overcoming those critical states.

A close reading of Shenoy's novels reveals that Shenoy analyzes the psychological panorama of the women characters in her novels. In the aforementioned novel the novelist portrays the inner journey of a character who suffers from the mental disorder state;and the character finally overcomes all those difficulties. Alienation, a theoretical term is used in the article to elucidate the emptiness of the character's mind. Ankita feels the total transformation of her mind within a few weeks. She narrates, "Earlier I had been experiencing a deep sense of pain. But now it seemed to have been replaced by a bottomless pit. I was totally the

opposite of what I had been a few weeks back”(Shenoy 132). Her suffering is replaced by an empty space in the mind. This terrible blankness eats up the essence of her life. “It was like I was dead from inside”(132). The more she tried to get rid of the labyrinth, the more she entangled in the chains of sufferings. The novelist has very artistically depicted the ‘endless vacuum’ (143). Ankita feels, “The words vanished from my mind like the chalk writings on a blackboard being wiped clean. I seemed to no longer have any control over them”(133). In *Life is What You Make It* Ankita feels, “Earlier I had been experiencing a deep sense of pain. But now it seemed to have been replaced by a bottomless pit. I was totally the opposite of what I had been a few weeks back”(132). The above quoted lines vividly express the idea of transformation or journey. A sudden shock devours her mental health. She suffers from depression and she attempts to commit suicide.

As stated earlier, the process of alienation passes through several steps; and the aforementioned discussion already clears the fact that Shenoy’s Ankita is the victim of Alienation. However, now a detail analysis of those five phases of alienation in the life of Ankita will enhance the purpose the present study. The following stages are discussed below.

Powerlessness

The term powerlessness indicates the lack of control over anything. The function of power is to control anything or anybody. There are two types of domination such as external and internal. When people lack the control internally, it damages the mental health. People fail to weave the chain of their own thoughts. People fail to control their emotions and passions. Thus, powerlessness suggests the disordered state of psychology. According to Marxism, powerlessness is the exploitation of the working class people in the capitalist society. It is called external powerlessness. Ankita in Preeti Shenoy’s *Life is What You Make it* fails to control her thoughts, emotions and feelings. According to Ankita:

What was truly terrifying was the blankness. There were simply no thoughts inside my head. It was all a blank. It was an endless vacuum, a huge void. Earlier, I had sought refuge in the magnificent images that I could conjure up without an effort. I could write I felt. I could pour my emotions and feelings into words. I had my poetry and my pictures and words. But this

terrible and completely strange state that I found myself in, was something that I just could not bear. (143)

Therefore, the state of powerlessness is vividly expressed through the character of Ankita. Her mental sickness causes her physical disorder. This powerlessness is the primary step of alienation.

Meaninglessness

This term denotes a negative outlook. When people find meaningless in any activity or in any object, people decide to move on from that particulars. However, people alienate themselves from that meaninglessness. If anybody thinks that life is meaningless, he or she tries to escape from it. The state of meaninglessness comes from a distasteful attitude. Ankita in PreetiShenoy's *Life is What You Make It* finds no meaning in her life. She starts considering herself worthless and useless. According to Ankita :

I feel down and depressed. I feel worthless. I don't know what is happening to me and why I am feeling this way. There is really no reason. I have tried to make these thoughts go away. I have failed. I don't want to do this MBA anymore. I can't bear the thought of looking at Joseph, Chaya and Jigna again. The thought of seeing my classmates faces make me sick. (134)

Ankita finds no reason for being alive. She considers that her life is meaningless. This thought of meaninglessness leads one towards depression and death. Meaninglessness is another term related to alienation. This type of attitude causes isolation and separation.

Normlessness

The term, norm stands for normal or natural behavior. Normlessness denotes the idea of abnormal behavior or unnatural activities. Powerlessness and meaninglessness cause isolation. Social isolation or estrangement proves the normlessness. Socially isolated person engages in the absurd and meaningless activities. This type of person tries to deviate from the easy flow of life. Alienation avoids motion and it invites stagnation. Ankita in Preeti Shenoy's *Life is What You Make It* gets a bitter experience during that state. She says :

Nights and merged into one another. I could not bear the light and would draw the curtains of my room and shut the windows. If my parents as much as tried to open it even a teeny bit, I would scream asking them to let it be. I was beginning to develop an affinity towards anything that was dark. During the walking hours, it was pure agony to just remain alive. The pain was terrifying. (143)

The agonies and helplessness prompt her to move towards depression and disappointment. It results abnormal activities that are called the normless activities. Normlessness is another major step of Alienation followed by powerlessness and meaninglessness.

Isolation

Isolation means separation from any belonging. Social isolation suggests one kind of alienation from the social people. Out of depression and disappointment people avoid human contact. Ankitain Preeti Shenoy's *Life is What You Make it* keeps herself aloof from the rest of the world. She confines herself within a closed door. According to Ankita :

I began avoiding all human contact. I did not want to run into anybody from my residential complex. I did not want to make conversation with anybody or explain why I was not going to college anymore. I lived in constant terror of meeting people and facing people. I did not want anymore to see me in this state. (150)

Social isolation effects on the mental health. Loneliness and solitariness can cause mental stress, anxiety and cognitive decline. Social isolation is a part of alienation.

Self-estrangement

The term, estrangement refers to the state of separation and isolation. When the word is added with self, the word focuses on a person's inner world i.e. mind and psychology. Being separated from the rest of the world, a person feels lonely and suffers endless miseries. Ankita feels the same. Her loneliness causes bad health and depression. After certain

period Ankita feels a separation within herself. It means she lacks the control over her thoughts and feelings. She feels a kind of detachment in her mind. She starts despising her self-esteem and finds no reason for remaining alive. Therefore, only one door is opened in her mind. According to Ankita, “To be trapped like this in one’s own body is a fate worse than death. With death, at least there is an end. Here the suffering is endless. You cannot run from yourself. The torment is bestial”(145).

Despite all those hazardous experiences Ankita survives at the end of the novel. She finds ‘a tiny ray of hope’ (Shenoy 165), when she meets with a doctor named MadhusudanJairam. The doctor’s ‘reassuring words of hope and inspiration’ (166) penetrate her heart and illuminate the darkness of her mind. She starts loving her life and she becomes able to overcome the difficulties slowly. The things that torment her are none other than the past thoughts. However, she tries to recover. A sudden awareness makes her understand that she can control the things that disturb her mental health. According to Ankita :

The realization was like an epiphany. It gave me a jolt. I was in fact ‘normal’! If I pretended to be ‘normal’ and behaved just like everybody else, if I masked my emotions and I smiled a lot, even if I felt disconsolate, nobody would be able to tell. I made up my mind right then, that if that was all it took to be termed ‘normal’, that was how it would be from now on. (176)

To conclude we may say that here the writer is very much successful to show the triumph of Ankita in her life journey however intuitively. The charm of such journey lies in its success and in Indian context the triumph of any female is marked with many hurdles and therefore in the 21st century government are to declare schemes like ‘Kanyashree’(a scheme by the government of West Bengal to assist financially to a marriageable girl) or ‘Betibachaobetiparao’ (a scheme by the Government of India to give financial assistance to a girl to encourage for education). Here Ankita like Indu in ShasideshPandey’s ‘Roots and Shadow’ feels the worth of life though it is not in the land of her heart’s desire but in a land of her control. The title of the novel, *Life is What You Make it* connotes the idea of control over one’s own life. It denotes the notion of hope and a positive overview. Towards the end of the novel Ankita becomes the master of her own fate or destiny. Ankita says,

“Finally, it was time to leave. I felt a slight sense of trepidation as well as happiness. I was happy that my ordeal was over and I was now ‘free’ (193).

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