

Unfolding Feminine Identity with Preeti Shenoy's *The Secret Wish List*

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Abstract. Although influences of women's empowerment in contemporary times have resulted in improving their position in the society, still male gender unequivocally occupy a superior position in comparison to female gender. The identity of women continues to remain veiled in the shadow of their male counterparts. Still there are various stereotypes bound around the female identity and they do nothing but to accept silently. Preeti Shenoy, one of the prominent Indian women contemporary writers, gives voice to this muted group through her narrative voice. Her protagonists are mostly bold and beautiful women who daringly choose to express their opinion, be it mental or sexual without any regret in their life. They do not hesitate or suppress their feelings instead they stand for their rights and prove themselves equal to their male counterparts both mentally and financially. The present paper deal with the detailed study of the sentiments of one of such protagonist, Diksha, who chooses to live her life on her own created wish-list and breaks away the shackles of a lifeless marriage after a gap of fifteen long years. Shenoy with her 'excellent storytelling skills' as acclaimed by 'The Times of India', weaves the story of Diksha as a teenager, as a daughter, as a sister, as a wife, as a daughter-in-law, as a mother and above all as an individual itself. It is a story related to almost 60 percent of Indian women who suppress their dreams for their parents, husband, children and the society.

Keywords : Women empowerment; gender equality; identity; human relationship; feminine sensibility.

With the age of development and changes in almost every field, there came changes in the concept of Indian Womanhood. Many women-centric literary works started acknowledging the status of Indian woman in a male-dominated society. They have actually moved away from portraying a traditional self-sacrificing dependent woman towards a self-expressive independent woman. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman described her, "Here she comes, running, out of prison and off the pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman." (Allen, 32) With this concept of realistic 'New Woman' in her work came out Preeti Shenoy, author of thirteen bestsellers and still counting. An avid blogger, artist, yoga enthusiast and a mom of two, today she is one of India's popular women writers chiefly concerned with female protagonist in her work. Recipient of the "Indian of the Year" award for 2017 by Brands Academy, she is one of the top five highest selling authors in India and also consistently nominated on the Forbes long-list of the hundred most influential celebrities in India since 2013.

Today as Shenoy herself stands as a live example of a modern woman, so are her woman characters. Diksha, the protagonist of *The Secret Wish-list* is one such character. Initially stuck between the cobwebs of her duty and her wishes, the story is basically the journey of finding her true self. It is an engrossing tale of an Indian woman who as a young girl has ambitions and an identity of her own which gets lost over the years due to her parental pressures of her marriage to someone of their own choice at a very tender age. It starts off in Chennai where sixteen-year-old Diksha is just like any other typical teenager – bubbly, enthusiastic and positive. She and her best friend Tanu spend lots and lots of time together studying and gossiping endlessly. Enters to her life Ankit, Diksha’s elder brother’s friend and their tender heart fell for each other. That sixteen-year-old love filled moments, those secret meetings, that secret exchange of hand written notes dedicated to each other and the little desire of a teenager-heart wishing for ‘some more’ is all well described by Shenoy. And then comes the day which sealed Diksha’s fate and changed her life and her identity forever. One silly mistake of meeting Ankit alone on an overnight school project and everything is just finished. Diksha is forcefully withdrawn from her school, separated from her best friend and finally married to Sandeep, a typical high-earning conservative Indian husband who is having a good house and a good job and everything that an Indian parent consider in a perfect marriage of a material man. She is not even given a chance to explain herself or to rectify her mistake and is made to accept the verdict of her parents for the rest of her life :

I was forced into marriage at nineteen... in the second year of college, for God’s sake. I made one silly error at sixteen and was branded for life. (*The Secret Wish List*, 73)

Diksha is now full-time housewife to Sandeep for the past fifteen years and they have an intelligent child, Abhay. Her entire existence revolves around them and seems to have no individual life at all :

I have dutifully married a ‘suitable boy’, dutifully produced a child and have busied myself raising him... 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. (16)

It is true that our society has progressed a lot. We live in a world which we call modern. We talk about feminism, women empowerment and what not but the question is that have we really achieved that in our personal lives too ? Of course women are no longer sitting at their homes only but have come out equally on their professional work front too. But the million dollar question is whether a woman is

really free from her household responsibility too. It has often been seen that if a woman wants to pursue her career she must be able to balance herself well with the household responsibility as well as her professional work responsibility. The burden of domestic chores, cooking meals and rearing children are still considered their unannounced responsibilities. In any case men are considered as the primary provider for the family and women are supposed to prioritise their home's responsibilities. Still mothers are more responsible for her children than their father. If there is nobody to look around then a mother must resign from her job to give her child the best care he deserves. Among most of the married couples it is always 'she' who should be able to manage well between her job as well as her family needs. Similarly Diksha too, decides to stay back and look after Abhay whereas Sandeep chooses to earn and provide for the family. Talking about her book, Preeti Shenoy in an interview with Women's Web states :

All Indian men are definitely not like Sandeep. (Thankfully!) However, I think most women would agree with me that there is a lot of Sandeep in an average Indian man. Most Indian women feel grateful if their husband helps around in the house. If he can as much as prepare a cup of tea, it is considered an 'achievement'. I find that sad really, especially in the times we live in. I also see so many advertisements where the woman is still shown cooking, serving the family that waits around on the dining table, and then rushing to work where she effortlessly manages her job and home, and comes back with a smile on her face! We really cannot be superwomen. We do need men to help around at home, cook and raise kids. It has to be a joint effort.

(<https://www.womensweb.in/articles/preeti-shenoy-author-interview/>)

The society has set a pattern for women to live her life. They are taught to adjust and accept the things as they are and are always expected to pretend themselves to be happy. Marriage is a continuous process of give and take. It is not just about expecting everything only from one partner but about realising that your better half may also have some hopes and aspirations. It requires equal efforts from both individuals. It is not only about the happiness of the husband all alone but about finding a friend in a husband with whom you multiply your happiness and divide your sorrow. All these traits were always missing from Diksha's life. Sandeep was never there for her as he always kept himself busy in his work. Even before marriage when Sandeep had first come to check out Diksha, he had said, "I am a simple guy and it doesn't take much to keep me happy." (29). Diksha recalls :

Thinking back now, I recall with a small pang of pain that he had never talked about making me happy. It was about keeping him happy. (29)

Shobha De, a well known Indian novelist and columnist, in her book *Spouse: The Truth about Marriage* states on the various aspects of marriage:

Marriage is a matter of trust, companionship, affection and sharing. Marriage is also a system to understand other partner's moods and eccentricities. There is no such thing as a 'perfect marriage' or 'perfect spouse'. Marriage is an ideal union or meeting of two bodies, minds and souls. (4)

Sandeep is an extreme case of an insensitive husband who has no emotions and is very conservative in thoughts and selfish and cold in his behaviour. He even decides his wife's clothes and thrusts his sexual desires over her without even her consent :

... 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, here in India, where people hush up even rape and do not speak about it, how do things like 'marital rape' even stand a chance to be discussed. Fact is, I hate sex with Sandeep. But I do my duty as wife. How can he have no clue as to what I really want? How can he be so insensitive to my needs? (62)

He switches off the light and tears off my clothes. This time the love-making is animalistic, rough, and savage. It is as though he wants to punish me and claim his ownership of me. He does not even notice that I am crying and sobbing as he thrusts and thrusts. (192)

He was so busy with himself that he never bothered to care about other's sentiment be it his wife, his son or his own mother as well :

Sandeep is busy. But still, he didn't even wait for the report... 'Yes, I do know him,' she says wearily. 'Sadly, my son is a selfish idiot. I erred in raising him,' bitterness creeps into her tone. (120)

Almost every Indian woman's biggest fear is to deal with her mother-in-law after marriage. Thankfully this was not the case with Diksha. Hers was the most understanding one. Still today it is very rare to find such kind of match between the feminine sensibility of a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law :

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,' she says. (122)

In fact it was only due to her mother-in-law and her best friend Tanu that Diksha was able to check out all those items which she had listed in her wish-list and live her life happily on her own terms. From helping Diksha with her son or to help her continue the salsa classes and to even make her parents understand those feelings of Diksha which her own mother could not understand, she was there for her each and every time :

I have seen the whole picture. I cannot blindly support my son. I know all that he has put you through. In some ways, he is responsible for being in the position he finds himself in. He has dug his own grave. (254)

The Secret Wish List is a roller coaster ride of emotions and feelings. It shows the real struggle between one's responsibilities and dreams. It argues for the fact that 'We all must live our lives and we should do what makes us happy'. (74). But for this we must take charge of our life. After being treated like a 'doormat' consistently for fifteen long years, Diksha finally chooses to fight back. She accepts the fact that a mother or a wife is also a woman and a human being, just like everyone else, and deserves to be treated well :

I have made up my mind. I cannot be a silent martyr anymore. I have been treated like a football all along—kicked first by my parents to Sandeep's court, and then kicked around by Sandeep all my married life. Now that I have finally found my voice and my grounding, it has created a furore... This is my life and I am determined now to really live it, to follow my heart's urging which I have ignored and tried to suppress for so long. (249)

Sarah Stickney Ellis in *The Wives of England* strongly cautions young ladies against marrying men of ill repute—and against marrying men, who do not love their wives:

Now, if on the near approach of marriage, a woman finds this tendency in the companion she has chosen, if she cannot open to him her whole heart, or if he does not open his heart to her, but maintains a distant kind of authoritative manner, which shuts her out from sympathy and equality with himself, it is time for her to pause, and think seriously

before she binds herself for the life to that worst of all slavery, the fear of a husband. (22)

For Ellis, marrying for love to a man who loves and values his wife is crucial for an ideal marriage. She believes that a marriage without love is a doomed marriage.

In the epilogue it is shown that Diksha walks out of her loveless marriage and moves in with Ankit, the love of her life, who gave her the option of choosing a life of her own choice, helps her being independent and capable of making her own decisions. Her parents too finally made peace with her and accepts her decisions and choices in life. Shenoy very beautifully carves out the truth that any relationship without mutual love and care eventually becomes just a formality or burden. Parents must bond well with their children, understand their feelings and help them choose what is best for them with their own experiences of life. Life partners must give each other the well deserved respect, love and space needed in a relationship. Only this can create a happy home environment for them and their children as well. Domination and suppression for long can only result in revolt and betrayal.

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