

Feminine Psychology in Preeti Shenoy's *Life is What You Make It*

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Abstract: In Preeti Shenoy's *Life is What You Make It*, the author explores the complexities of feminine psychology through the lens of her protagonist, Ankita Sharma. This novel delves into the societal pressures and internal struggles that women face, such as mental health issues, career aspirations, and the expectations of family and relationships. Shenoy's portrayal of Ankita provides insights into the duality of feminine identity—balancing personal desires with societal norms. The narrative captures Ankita's journey from a state of despair to one of self-realization and empowerment, illustrating the importance of mental well-being and the pursuit of one's dreams. Through the lens of feminine psychology, the novel reveals how external and internal conflicts shape a woman's identity and choices. Shenoy skillfully addresses themes of resilience, love, and societal expectation, providing a rich tapestry of experiences that resonate with many women today. This article examines how Shenoy's work not only highlights the challenges women face but also celebrates their strength and capacity for change. By integrating psychological principles with storytelling, Shenoy creates a narrative that is both relatable and thought-provoking, ultimately advocating for a life defined by personal choice and authenticity.

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Introduction

In the vibrant and evolving landscape of contemporary Indian English literature, certain authors distinguish themselves through their profound engagement with the human condition. Among these, Preeti Shenoy stands out as a uniquely influential and celebrated voice, particularly for her nuanced exploration of women's inner lives and the multifaceted challenges they navigate in modern society. Her acclaimed novel, *Life Is What You Make It*, serves as a powerful testament to her thematic concerns. Far more than a simple narrative, the book meticulously constructs a rich tapestry of experiences that illuminate critical dimensions of feminine psychology, offering readers an indispensable lens through which to comprehend the intricate dynamics of mental well-being, the pervasive influence of societal expectations, and the complex journey towards female empowerment.

At the heart of this compelling exploration is Ankita, Shenoy's profoundly developed protagonist. Through Ankita's arduous journey, Shenoy immerses the reader in the sobering realities of mental illness, the relentless burden of societal pressures, and the often-unseen struggles inherent in the pursuit of self-actualization and personal autonomy. This article endeavors to dissect Shenoy's masterful portrayal of feminine psychology within *Life Is What You Make It*. By meticulously examining the diverse thematic elements ingrained in the novel, this study will

uncover how Shenoy meticulously crafts reflections of the compelling societal and psychological constructs that profoundly shape, and often constrain, women's lives.

Feminine Psychology and Mental Health

The intricate exploration of mental health within Preeti Shenoy's novel, *Life Is What You Make It*, establishes a vital framework for understanding the complexities of feminine psychology. Through the protagonist Ankita's deeply personal struggles, Shenoy incisively illustrates the profound psychological turmoil many women experience, frequently intensified by the pervasive and often rigid societal expectations placed upon them. Ankita is initially presented as a woman of considerable promise – intelligent, ambitious, and with a clear vision for her future. Yet, these aspirations are abruptly and tragically derailed by the sudden onset of significant mental health issues. Reflecting on her seemingly idyllic past, Ankita poignantly articulates the paradox of her situation: "I had everything that anyone could wish for—a great education, a loving family, and the support of friends" (Shenoy 43). This statement underscores the ironic dissonance between her outwardly perfect existence and the invisible battles raging within her mind, highlighting how mental illness can inexplicably disrupt even the most privileged lives, a reality often particularly

confounding and stigmatizing for women expected to embody resilience and perfection.

Shenoy's narrative in *Life Is What You Make It* courageously confronts the harsh realities of mental illness, steadfastly refusing to romanticize or simplify its devastating impact. The novel unequivocally emphasizes that mental health challenges are indiscriminate, capable of affecting individuals from any background, socio-economic status, or perceived level of success. This unvarnished portrayal aligns seamlessly with and actively contributes to the modern feminist discourse, which strenuously advocates for the de-stigmatization of mental health issues, especially concerning women. This perspective is reinforced by insights from mental health professionals, such as psychologist Dr. Deborah Serani, who observes, "Women are often expected to be the caretakers, the nurturers. This leads to higher chances of anxiety and depression when they feel they cannot meet these societal expectations" (Serani 215). Shenoy masterfully encapsulates this specific struggle, vividly demonstrating how the immense weight of these traditional roles and the accompanying societal pressures can tragically steer women towards paths of profound mental distress and emotional breakdown. The novel, therefore, not only sheds light on individual suffering but also critiques the broader cultural narratives that often fail to support women's holistic well-being.

Societal Expectations and Female Identity

In this novel, the protagonist, Ankita, embodies the struggles of women who face societal expectations that impinge upon their identities. As Ankita navigates her path, she encounters numerous obstacles that stem from societal norms and familial pressures, which often conflict with her individual aspirations. This internal struggle is most evident when Ankita is confronted with decisions that force her to choose between societal expectations and her personal dreams. She laments, "It was not just my dreams and aspirations that had been crushed; it was the very essence of how I defined myself" (Shenoy 127). Ankita's experiences reveal the profound impact of societal expectations on female identity formation.

Renowned philosopher Judith Butler posits that gender identity is a socially constructed performance rather than an innate quality. According to Butler, "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler 25). This notion is beautifully exemplified in Shenoy's novel as Ankita grapples

with the pressures of fulfilling the roles society has prescribed for her. Her constant inner turmoil highlights the intricate complexities of feminine psychology, as women's identities are often formed within a patriarchal framework that limits their autonomy and self-expression.

Ankita's plight reflects the experiences of many women who face the challenge of reconciling their individuality with societal expectations. These expectations often manifest in constraints that limit women's potential and restrict their self-expression. Women are socialized to prioritize the needs and desires of others over their own, and Ankita's story eloquently illustrates this phenomenon. Her struggles to assert herself and pursue her dreams reveal the immense power that societal expectations wield over women's identities. By exploring Ankita's journey, Shenoy sheds light on the systemic barriers that prevent women from fulfilling their potential. The novel serves as a powerful critique of societal norms that reinforce patriarchal structures and limit women's autonomy. Ankita's experiences reveal the urgent need to challenge these norms and create a more inclusive society that validates and celebrates women's identities.

Struggles with Self-Acceptance

In a society increasingly fixated on external metrics of success and validation, the quiet, insistent struggle for self-acceptance often unfolds within—a battle particularly acute for women navigating complex societal and psychological landscapes. Ankita's journey, a poignant exploration of this internal conflict, illuminates the profound challenges of tethering one's self-worth to external achievements rather than intrinsic value. Her experience resonates with principles of feminine psychology, shedding light on the deep-seated anxieties that can arise when identity is constantly evaluated by an external gaze. Pioneering psychoanalyst Karen Horney, a foundational figure in understanding feminine psychology, meticulously explored the internal struggles that often plague women. Horney posited that societal structures frequently compel women to intertwine their self-worth with their assigned roles within relationships and broader social contexts. This entanglement, she argued, can breed a profound sense of inadequacy should these external benchmarks remain unmet or perceived as unfulfilled. As Horney states, "A woman's identity is often intertwined with her relationships and societal roles, leading to feelings of inadequacy if those roles are not fulfilled" (144). This framework fosters what Horney termed

"basic anxiety," a pervasive feeling of helplessness that women may experience when their identity is externalized and constantly under societal scrutiny, rather than rooted in an authentic inner core.

Ankita's character arc vividly illustrates this psychological dynamic. Her struggle is not merely with external societal pressures but with an internalized narrative that anchors her value to professional achievements and the applause of others. From a young age, she likely absorbed messages, both overt and subtle, that her worth was contingent upon fulfilling specific expectations: excelling in her career, maintaining perfect relationships, and projecting an image of effortless competence. This constant striving for external validation created an internal pressure cooker, where every success felt temporary and every misstep amplified a lurking fear of inadequacy. The relentless pursuit of an ideal, not for personal fulfillment but for societal approval, left her feeling hollow and disconnected from her genuine self.

Her poignant confession, "I often felt like a puppet, strings pulled by everyone else's expectations," offers a raw glimpse into the mental exhaustion and loss of autonomy that accompany this struggle (Shenoy 189). For Ankita, these "strings" represented a myriad of unspoken demands: the expectation to climb the corporate ladder, to be the supportive friend, the perfect daughter, or the ideal partner. Every decision, every life choice, was filtered through the lens of "what will others think?" rather than "what truly resonates with me?" This constant external orientation chipped away at her self-trust, making it nearly impossible to differentiate between her own desires and the perceived desires of the world around her. The weight of these accumulated expectations created a deep-seated conflict, a chasm between the person she outwardly presented and the person she truly was, leading to a profound sense of inauthenticity and dissatisfaction.

This moment of profound insight—the realization of being a "puppet"—becomes a pivotal turning point in Ankita's arc. It forces her to confront the chasm between superficial societal approval and genuine personal fulfillment. Recognizing the puppet strings is the first, arduous step toward cutting them, initiating the painful but necessary process of redefining her worth not by external accolades but by internal authenticity and self-compassion. This internal shift signifies a crucial evolution in feminine psychology, as it encapsulates the deep-seated conflict women face in juxtaposing societal approval with personal fulfillment. It marks the beginning of a

journey inward, where the focus shifts from achieving external benchmarks to cultivating an identity rooted in self-acceptance, independent of external affirmation.

Ankita's journey, therefore, transcends a singular narrative; it mirrors the collective experience of many women striving to dismantle internalized beliefs and reclaim their inherent worth. Her path underscores the critical importance of fostering self-acceptance from within, cultivating an identity resilient to the shifting sands of societal judgment, and achieving a fulfillment that is truly her own. In a world that often demands conformity, the courage to embrace one's authentic self, flaws and all, remains one of the most profound acts of rebellion and self-liberation.

The Role of Relationships

In *Life Is What You Make It*, human relationships emerge as both fundamental pillars of support and potent catalysts for conflict. Through the intricate portrayal of Ankita's journey, Shenoy meticulously illustrates how the web of connections surrounding an individual profoundly impacts mental health, self-perception, and the path to recovery. The narrative emphasizes that for women, in particular, emotional and relational dynamics are not merely background elements but central forces that can either foster resilience or precipitate psychological distress.

Shenoy vividly captures the multifaceted nature of Ankita's relationships—be it with her family, her friends, or her romantic interests—showcasing their direct correlation with her psychological well-being. These interactions provide a lens through which readers can understand the complex interplay between external interpersonal forces and internal emotional states. When these relationships are nurturing, they offer a sense of belonging, validation, and emotional safety, which are critical for mental stability. Conversely, when marked by misunderstanding, expectation, or betrayal, they can become significant sources of anxiety and suffering. Feminist theorist bell hooks profoundly argues for the indispensable role of love and community in fostering emotional well-being, especially for women. She posits that "Love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust" (hooks 92). This holistic understanding of love extends beyond romantic ideals to encompass all meaningful human connections. In Ankita's life, these essential elements are palpably depicted within her most supportive friendships and certain familial bonds. Her relationship with her best friend, for instance, forms

an unwavering anchor, embodying the principles hooks outlines. This bond provides not only emotional solace but also practical support and unwavering belief, underscoring the vital importance of solidarity and shared understanding among women in navigating life's challenges. Such alliances function as crucial support systems, proving instrumental in Ankita's arduous journey toward psychological recovery.

Yet, Shenoy does not shy away from exploring the more detrimental facets of human connection. The novel starkly addresses the profound impact of unrequited love and betrayal, demonstrating how these experiences can severely complicate a woman's psychological landscape. Ankita's painful encounters with romantic disappointment highlight the vulnerability inherent in deep emotional investment. These moments reveal that while love is often idealized as a source of strength and vitality, it can, when unfulfilled or betrayed, lead to devastating emotional depletion. A poignant internal reflection from Ankita captures this paradox: "Love was supposed to make me feel alive, yet it drained me of my very essence" (Shenoy 238). This powerful realization illuminates the inherent tensions within feminine psychology regarding love, exposing how women's intense emotional engagement, while a capacity for deep connection, also opens them to profound vulnerability, ultimately leading to despair and a questioning of self-worth when those investments are not reciprocated or are shattered. The narrative thereby underscores that the quest for romantic fulfillment, when beset by heartache, can paradoxically erode the very essence it promised to nourish.

Empowerment and Self-Actualization

Preeti Shenoy's novel, *Life Is What You Make It*, transcends its initial exploration of profound despair and struggle to ultimately champion the transformative themes of empowerment and self-actualization. Through the compelling narrative of its protagonist, Ankita, the novel meticulously illustrates how the journey from adversity to authenticity is often arduous but invariably culminates in profound personal growth. Shenoy adeptly underscores the crucial role of agency within feminine psychology, portraying a woman who navigates immense challenges to gradually reclaim her identity and forge a life congruent with her deepest self.

Ankita's path to self-discovery is depicted as a testament to the power of individual will in overcoming external and internal obstacles. Initially

overwhelmed by her circumstances, she slowly begins to assert her agency, recognizing that her future is not predestined but rather a canvas she must paint herself. This process involves confronting deeply ingrained fears, challenging societal expectations, and dismantling self-limiting beliefs. As Shenoy illustrates, Ankita's journey is not a sudden epiphany but a deliberate, often painful, reconstruction of her sense of self, culminating in her ability to "forge a path that aligns with her true self" (Shenoy 312). This represents a pivotal moment where she actively chooses self-determination over continued victimhood.

This profound transformation resonates deeply with the tenets of humanist psychology, particularly the work of Carl Rogers. Rogers posits that "the fully functioning person is one who experiences a sense of freedom in making choices and is continuously growing towards self-actualization" (Rogers 150). Ankita's narrative strikingly mirrors this definition; through a combination of professional counseling and intense introspection, she embarks on a vital journey of self-acceptance. This process liberates her from the debilitating need for external validation, allowing her to recognize her inherent worth independently of societal judgments or past failures. A critical turning point in her evolution is marked by her powerful declaration: "I am not just defined by my failures, but by my resilience" (Shenoy 312). This assertion encapsulates her shift from a perception of self rooted in negative experiences to one grounded in enduring inner strength.

Furthermore, Ankita's narrative powerfully intersects with a feminist perspective that emphasizes empowerment through self-determination. Her resilience, particularly her ability to bravely combine her aspirations with the hard-won lessons from her struggles, highlights a crucial aspect of women's strength. It illustrates that true empowerment is not merely the absence of adversity, but rather the capacity to rise, adapt, and thrive after encountering significant challenges. By consciously choosing to learn from her past and integrate these insights into her future dreams, Ankita exemplifies how women can transform their struggles into formidable sources of personal power and self-direction. Her journey becomes a compelling argument for the intrinsic strength found in the feminine capacity for endurance and renewal.

Conclusion

Preeti Shenoy's novel, *Life Is What You Make It*, stands as a vital contribution to contemporary

literature, offering an exceptionally insightful and empathetic examination of feminine psychology. Through its intricate narrative, Shenoy masterfully navigates the often-unseen struggles of mental health, the pervasive weight of societal expectations, and the arduous, yet ultimately transformative, journey of self-discovery. The protagonist, Ankita, serves as a poignant avatar for countless women, her experiences illuminating critical themes such as the quest for a coherent identity in a fragmented world, the complex dynamics of interpersonal relationships, and the arduous path toward genuine personal empowerment. By unflinchingly depicting Ankita's internal and external battles, Shenoy champions the essential virtues of self-acceptance and unwavering resilience, particularly when confronting immense societal pressures. Ultimately, the novel constructs a powerful argument for a radical redefinition of women's inherent worth, urging readers to look beyond superficial or traditionally imposed norms and instead value inner strength, autonomy, and individual spirit.

The profound understanding of feminine psychology gleaned from Shenoy's narrative underscores a fundamental truth: while women are frequently confronted with formidable challenges—ranging from internal turmoil to external systemic barriers—they inherently possess an extraordinary capacity for strength and resilience. The novel compellingly demonstrates that this inner fortitude enables them not only to overcome adversity but also to actively forge their own unique and authentic life paths. Shenoy's work thus emerges as a vital and poignant reminder of the multifaceted and often intricate nature of women's lived experiences. It highlights the crucial significance of self-definition as a potent counter-narrative against a world perpetually inclined to dictate roles, prescribe identities, and impose limitations, ultimately affirming the liberating power of personal agency and an unyielding spirit.

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