

Family and Society Interface: A Postmodern Reading of Preeti Shenoy's The Rule Breakers

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Abstract

The present study aims the presentation of how Preeti Shenoy's effort to explore the microcosm of society within a single family in the novel, *The Rule Breakers*. The term family creates the chain of blood relations such as father, mother, son, daughter, sister, brother, uncle, aunt, etc. What family reflects within the four walls of a home, society reflects the same on a larger scale. Social intricacies denote the complexities of socio-cultural, religious, and political issues that weave the chains or shackles of the doctrine or dogma. The novel, *The Rule Breakers* is enriched with fundamental socio-political problems such as human relationships, education, job, gender equality, and the conflict between conventional and unconventional forms. Being an Indian English woman novelist of the twenty-first century, Shenoy has depicted an Indian family. The present century is an era of science and technology or a postmodern age. Therefore, critical elements of postmodernism such as randomness, playfulness, and fragmentation are very much present in the previous novel. The postmodern approach to life creates conflict between tradition and modernity. Such conflict begets complications and intricacies in society. The difficulties arise not only from the man-woman relation but also from the position of other sexes. Preeti Shenoy created a gay character in the novel, *The Rule Breakers* to emphasize the

complications of human relationships based on sex and gender. This article focuses on the postmodern social intricacies of a single-family, i.e., a microcosm of society.

Keywords: Family; Fragmentation; intricacies; postmodernism; a microcosm

A family is a social group. A social group is an aggregate of individuals in which definite relations exist between the members, and each individual is conscious of the group boundary and its symbols. In other words, a social group has at least a rudimentary structure and organization (that includes normative rules, status, roles, rituals, etc.) and a psychological basis in the consciousness of its members. The family is not the only social group that influences human resources' social and cultural development; a village, a nation, a trade union, or a political party is all social groups. (Chaudhuri 2)

The concept of family is a microcosm of society. What family reflects within the four walls of a home, culture reflects the same on a larger scale? Social intricacies denote the complexities of socio-cultural, religious, and political issues that weave the chains or shackles of the doctrine or dogma. The term family creates the chain

of blood relations such as father, mother, son, daughter, sister, brother, uncle, aunt, etc. The concept of family is deeply rooted in the past centuries and the Indian epics such as The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. Marriage, like a social institution, frames one family and gives the name of any relationship. However, the Indian great epic, The Ramayana, partially focuses on the value of relations as well as the duty and responsibility of it. The whole story finds the bond and commitment of the relationship within the family. For instance, king Dasharatha has committed to his wife; son Ramachandra was dedicated to his father; Bharata and Lakshmana were committed to their elder brother, Ramachandra, as a husband, Ramachandra was devoted to his wife as well as a king; he was dedicated to his subjects. All the characters are bound to follow the duty and responsibility to give value to any relation. The traditional importance of the Indian family gets specific changes with time. In this twentieth century, a radical change is notable in the scenario and life of the Indian family. However, in this article, an attempt has been made to show how Preeti Shenoy's novel, The Rule Breakers reveals a postmodern approach to the microcosm of social intricacies within a family. Duhan emphasizes the value of relationships through the following words.

A society is a group of people related to each other through continuous and uninterrupted relations. It is also a group of like-minded people largely governed.

By their norms and values. Human society, it is observed, is characterized by the pattern of relationships between individuals who share cultures, traditions, beliefs, values, etc. (Duhan 197)

The present article is developed with a few objectives - firstly, the intimate association of family and society or family as a microcosm of society; secondly, culture and literature; thirdly, the conflict between tradition and modernity due to socio-cultural changes; fourthly, the trouble of gender equality, fifthly, the problematic situation of other sexes, and finally, postmodern approach towards family and human relation. A radical change can be noticed in the lives of social beings with the movement of time and place.

The intimate association of family and society:

However, social issues change with the changes of time. In this context, the story of a family may be read as a ground for the social-political problems of contemporary society. Human relation is conventionally based on gender identities, such as male and female. However, there is another sex in society apart from this male-female binary. The complications arise not only from the man-woman relation but also from the position of other sexes. Preeti Shenoy created a gay character in the novel, The Rule Breakers to emphasize the complications of human relationships based on sex and gender. Shenoy has artistically presented female characters to depict the life and situation of Indian women in the twenty-first century. The role of the Indian female character is a significant factor in pointing out the radical changes in the present century. Indian history has recorded the suffering and tormenting situation of the women of the past centuries, the fight and struggling lives of the women in the late colonial and early post-colonial period, and finally, the women's empowerment in the present era. What one finds in society on a large scale can be seen within the family as a microcosm. Dubey, in his article, focuses on the certainty of changes and

transformation through the following words.

Looking at the history of society, one will find that the nature of different communities has gone through changes from the Paleolithic period to the present age of Information Technology. The people's living styles, faiths, beliefs, cultures, etc., have never remained uniformly consistent. With time, owing to changes taking place in the environment and with the emergence of new technologies, we observed that societies have not remained stubborn about their norms and values, the reflections of which can be found in

Different forms of literature. Kalidas, a great poet, born in Indian history, is first afraid of the uncertain attitude of the people but then pleads his points of view that provide us union of the old and the new. (Dubey 84)

Society and Literature:

The aesthetic excellence of a person exposes the scenario of society in general. "aesthetic excellence" refers to literature or any literary work. Literary texts generally reflect the "economics, family, relationship, climate, landscape, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars and religion" (Albrecht, 426). Literature is symbolically a mirror of society, as a mirror is the threshold or door between our natural appearance and reflected appearance. Culture and literature also serve the same purpose symbolically. One of the significant functions of literature is to present the actual life situation within the imagination framework.

We all know that literature mirrors society. What happens in a community is reflected in literary works in one form or

another. The literal meaning of literature is the art of written work in different forms, such as poetry, plays, stories, prose, fiction, etc.; it may also consist of text based on information and imagination. (Duhan 197)

In-home and abroad literature manifests the scenario of the society. A reader can easily distinguish the changes in the storyline of any literary text. With the movement of time, socio-political and cultural scenario changes for the development of thought and the advancement of technology. The writers of the nineteenth-century display the scenario of their contemporary socio-political situation, which is far more different from the panorama of the twenty-first century. The present era is entitled the age of science and technology. At the same time, it is a time of globalization what Shashi Deshpande (1983-2021), Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), Rama Mehta (1923-1978), Nayantara Sehgal (1927), Kamala Markandaya (1924- 2004), Anita Desai (1937) display in their literary works is entirely different from the presentation of Preeti Shenoy (1971 onwards) who exhibits the lives and manners of the postmodern era. As an Indian woman novelist, Shenoy has very distinctively presented the lives of Indian people in the contemporary period. She has shown her uniqueness through her exhibition of narrative strategies and the manifestation of Indian families in her fictional narration. In her novel, *The Rule Breakers*, Shenoy has depicted the discrimination of gender within the family where boys only enjoy the privileges of everything. She narrates: 'Why can't

I get a job and work, Papa? Why should only Animesh have that privilege?' Veda wanted to ask. But her mother taught her to never talk back to her elders,

especially to her father. It was disrespectful, she was told. So she and her sisters would silently listen to her father's rants" (Shenoy 9). Veda's voice raises the question of gender equality, and it mirrors the contemporary Indian society where girl child is neglected. Veda finds the discrimination again after her marriage. She is not allowed to continue studying or to get employed. Some of her characters in the novel give instructions of conventional norms. Such traditional models restrict the life and situation of women characters. Veda, the woman of the postmodern era, fails to cope with the traditional culture of the previous generations. However, complications start from the conflict. The conflict between tradition and modernity:

A family incorporates all the socio-political matters that are very much embedded within society. Human relationships, education, job, gender equity, and social acceptance are the fundamental subject of a family and community. The family itself is an umbrella term that holds everything. Within a family, people see the various human relations. The dichotomy between the old and new generations is familiar in any society. What was unconventional or strange for the old age is to a certain extent, conventional or natural for the new generation. Therefore, such conflict is prevalent, and society moves forward with all its changes and transformations. This generation gap sometimes causes intricacies within the family. Female family members were restricted a few decades ago in fields such as academy and employment, whereas the women of the current period struggle for empowerment. Therefore, this era is very much transitional in respect of social acceptance. Complications and intricacies are found when society disapproves.

The twenty-first century is marked as the era of advancement in science, technology, and human resource. On the other hand, globalization is the keynote of the twenty-first century. One of the significant concerns of globalization is a free-mixing culture that accepts cultural practices across social boundaries. The postmodern theory encompasses the notion of globalization, flexibility, fragmentation, multiplication, unprejudiced, randomness, playfulness, and disorder. Postmodern use of language itself is, to some extent, a game, as one of the postmodern theorists, Lyotard, considers it a 'language game.' The origin of language in society, as society frames the linguistic sign. Language itself is based on socio-cultural background. Language is nothing but the medium of communication and the narrative form of

Events. However, the role of language is vital in the past centuries as well as in the current century. The language we learn at home, in our society, and through this linguistic structure, we move towards the labyrinth of the socio-cultural realm. The role of language is very much relevant to the present context of the paper as linguistic sign determines an individual's social identity.

Before we deal with the postmodern approach to human society and the literary text, we need to be familiar with this age of digitalization and globalization. In this age of science and technology, people get rid of the clutches of social dogma and prejudices. Instead of being too much controlled by the colonial clutches. However, a continuous conflict is seen between conventional and unconventional practices. Writers of past centuries depicted the lives of Indian people with all their traditional values and moralities. In contrast, the writers of the

postmodern period intend to reveal the playful and random attitude of the individual.

Postmodern philosophers like Jean Francois Lyotard, Habermas, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida and Baudrillard are very much concerned with the socially constructed identity of a person. Postmodern writers and theorists focus on the female sex or other sex, as they were cornered and marginalized during the past decades. The issue of sexuality and the notion of gender are vital in the present era. Postmodern writers expose the struggle of the weaker sex as well as their effort to fight back against the blow of a male-dominated society. In his book, *Postmodern Social Theory*, George Ritzer states that "there are intimations of postmodernism in sociological theory, the real roots of postmodern thinking lie in literature, architecture, theatre, painting, dance, and related fields " (Ritzer 18).

The trouble with gender equality

In *The Rule Breakers*, Preeti Shenoy's Veda faces the problems of an intermediate situation where society fails to cope with the new arrival. Veda, a young girl, struggles hard to occupy her space in the outdoor society where male members dominate aggressively. When she was a daughter of the family, she was not allowed to study further for higher education. Now, after marriage, she is a family's wife, and she struggles hard to fulfill her desires. Once, she wishes to continue studying to get rid of her monotonous life. Her mother-in-law remarks badly to discourage her want to. However, her father-in-law supports her effort and remarks:

'You know my wife – she is just an eighth-class fail. She is not educated. She does not

understand or appreciate the value of education. They lied to me at the

Time of marriage, saying she had done her matriculation. I found out only later. But anyway, that is all many years in the past. I tell you this because I do not want to be upset about her remarks. I have noticed that you feel bad, but. I see it on your face. Bhuwan and – we have learned to put up with her moods, anger, and sharp words over the years. But you – you are new here. (Shenoy 60)

A married woman's education is appeared strange not only within a family but also in society. People find it weird or strange to see a married woman's struggle for education in contemporary society. When Veda enables herself to continue her study, she feels something odd about other students' appearance. She narrates:

I feel I am leading a dichotomous life. I am struggling to come to terms with being a married woman. Nobody else in my class was married, and they were shocked to discover I was. The way the girls screamed when they found the fact –it was like I have a disease or something. I felt embarrassed and self-conscious as they asked me many questions until one of them asked them to leave me alone and mind their own business. (Shenoy 68)

Tradition vs. modern is one of the major conflicting issues, and it gives birth to a new society where things are appeared to be changed or transformed. Veda's situation is prevalent in such a transitional period where people of the old generation cannot accept the arrival of unconventional norms, and the people of the new age fail to cope with the traditional values of the orthodox society. Veda in *The Rule Breakers* suffers from the tormenting

situation in the orthodox community. She is the role model for the suffering women who are the victims of the conventional norms of society. Feminists struggle hard to establish the voices of women in society. Family is a microcosm of culture and literature reflects society through the manifestation of family. In *The Rule Breakers*, Shenoy presents socio-cultural issues in a family where a reader can peep into the psychological panorama of a female member, Veda, who is prey to the orthodox society.

Education is one of the significant sources of human resource development. This education was out of reach for the girl child a few decades ago in India. It is education that opens the door for employment and economically independent. Thus, female members of the family fail to do any outdoor duty that is based on education. The question of gender equity and the discrimination against gender are a burning issue in society as well as in the socio-cultural.

The scenario of any literary work. Clear discrimination is found when a boy child gets all the privileges, and a girl child remains deprived of all her necessary demands. In the academic field, such discrimination is noted. Shenoy here depicts the scenario vividly:

None of the girls minded that Animesh was treated differently by their parents. He was undoubtedly their favorite child. Being the family's baby, he was pampered by his sisters and their parents. While their father didn't know much about the girls' academic performance, he monitored his son's progress at school like a hawk watching its prey. (Shenoy 9)

The problematic situation of other sexes:

The roles of gender and sex are different on the ground of their origin. Gender is

socially constructed, whereas sex is biological. Judith Butler has pointed out the problem of gender and sexuality in her masterpiece, *Gender Trouble*. Butler says that gender identity should be based on the performance of an individual rather than the socially constructed identity of males and females. One person's sexual identity determines their physical appearance, whereas one person's gender identity is determined by social recognition. Sexual identity is indeed not only male and female. There is another sex also.

Similarly, heterosexual performance is conventional in society, and social people readily accept it. The concept of homosexuality is not at all normative in contemporary society. In *The Rule Breakers*, Shenoy depicts the conception of social people about a gay and homosexual relationship. In the novel, Bhuwan says, "Then there's another misconception. People think that gay men are promiscuous and have multiple partners. That's simply not true. Sexual promiscuity is a human phenomenon. It's not restricted to men alone –whether straight or gay. We, gays, are a misunderstood lot,' he said" (Shenoy 297-8). Society alone is responsible for the marginal position of the other sex, gay and lesbian. They feel cornered at home as well as in the community. Nobody takes them quickly in contemporary society. As earlier said, language is socially constructed, and there is no such linguistic sign that can determine the other sex because there is only binary construction of words such as he-she, his-her, sir-madam, brother-sister, and daughter and son.

In Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* issue of sex plays a significant role in controlling the marital life of Veda, the protagonist. Veda's husband, Bhuwan, is gay, secretly continuing his homosexual

relationship with his male partner. Society is not ready to accept the matter; that is why he is continuing his homosexual relationship secretly. Similarly, he

Reluctantly marries Veda, as he fails to confess the reality before his parents. Bhuwan said, "People have many misconceptions about gay men" (Shenoy 297). A reader quickly finds out about such hidden life of Bhuwan as well as his hesitation to disclose the truth. The only reason behind such diplomatic behavior is nothing but the question of social approval. Bhuwan also carries on a normal lifestyle within a family frame to avoid marginalized life. As the story progresses, Veda, his wife, realizes the original story. When Bhuwan is caught red-handedly, he narrates.

Like any other group of people, we homosexual men are attracted only to certain types of men who spark our interest. Everyone thinks that just because we are gay, we will have sexual desire for all men. That is absurd! Straight men think they should be afraid of us as we may hit on them, which is ridiculous. Gay men are not predatory, and it's not like we cannot control our desires and lust after every man. (Shenoy 297)

After listening to the reality from Bhuwan, Veda accepts everything readily and reacts with a positive vibe. She decides to make Bhuwan unite with Vikki, his male partner. Veda wants to be separated from Bhuwan, and she searches for her new independent life. Bhuwan's mother cannot take everything easily and feels helpless in such a condition. It is only Veda who takes the venture and handles everything in a very positive sense. Veda, the fruit of the new generation, readily accepts unconventional situations. Veda's positive attitude is likely to be the harvest of the

postmodern era. The postmodern age crosses all the limitations and restrictions. In the article, "Homosexual in India –The Invisible Conflict," Anuradha Parasar focuses on the changes in society in the following narration:

The institution of marriage in society is generally regarded as extending only to male-female relationships, although most marriage statutes use gender-neutral language. Whereas, many examples of acceptance of homosexual marriages have only been recently forthcoming as society is gradually becoming more permissive. This change is reflected in the increasing number of jurisdictions decriminalizing such acts. (Parasar).

Postmodern approach toward family and human relation

In *The Rule Breakers*, Shenoy has presented the discrimination above that is very much present in society on a larger scale. An organization contains few families; that is why the complexities and intricacies of the family are initially the complications of the community as a whole. Everything begins at home. Gender discrimination is one of the significant problems in society as well as in the family. Such dichotomy and discrimination beget the theory of feminism, where the theorists fight against the subjugation and domination of male bodies. The postmodern approach is, to some extent, a reaction against the traditional practice of society. Postmodern treatment is fundamentally based on the theory of deconstruction. It opens the path of the flexible nature of the position. Earlier, people never cared for the female interest and female voices; instead, they emphasized the male choices. But postmodern thinkers take care of the woman's power of speech and their well-being. Being a postmodern woman writer of

India, Preeti Shenoy has meticulously presented Veda's revolutionary voice against the privileged male society.

Before I conclude, it must be noted that Shenoy has given a message to humanity. Shenoy's fictional world is not only a reflection of society in absolute but also a replication of an imaginary world. Shenoy indeed depicts the problems of the socio-political culture. At the same time, she presents the solutions to those difficulties. However, her approach is not merely to portray the contemporary socio-political phenomenon of Indian society; instead, she is very critical of the community's problems. Her novels show how an individual can get rid of the labyrinth of culture or the challenging situations of the organization. Shenoy's Veda is the role model of a female character. Shenoy's Postmodern approach leads her fictional character toward a new path in life. If Shenoy's Veda is found to be the victim of the conventional doctrine, the story will end with tolerance and suffering. But Veda's survival instinct and mental spirit save her from the suffocation of her marital life.

Finally, it is noted that Preeti Shenoy handles the socio-cultural issues of an Indian family. The novel, *The Rule Breakers* is enriched with fundamental socio-political problems such as human relationships, education, job, gender equality, and the conflict between conventional and unconventional forms. The traditional values in the Indian epics are far from the contemporary life and culture of human society. In the present era, the standard weight of a human relationship is rarely found among human beings. Therefore, the solid bond of human relations is cracked; such a gap creates complications and intricacies. However, the

certainty of change is found in every socio-political field and the culture of human society. Metamorphosis or transformation is bound to create conflict and trouble. Thus, competition and situation beget complications and intricacies. Finally, it is found how Preeti Shenoy explores the microcosm of society within a single family, manifesting a microscopic outlook combined with telescopic vision.

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