

A Study of Human Relationships in Preeti Shenoy's Novel "Life is What You Make It"

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Abstract

Literature has always been a mirror to the different forms of human life. It includes not only man- woman relationship but involves all human relationships. It highlights the various social aspects of human world with a keen insight for the improvement in society. Literature reflects not only the social reality but also shapes the complex ways in which men and women organize themselves, their interpersonal relationships and their perception of the socio-cultural reality. Every individual needs the companionship and assistance of other individual for the survival in the life. However, amidst of all the common goal and interests, the existence of emotional value cannot be ignored..The current paper underscores the same aspects underlined by Preeti Shenoy in her one of the best-selling novels in India. Her second novel "Life is What You Make it" was among the top selling novels of 2011 in India. She has been called relationship expert. The present paper aims to study human relationships in Preeti Shenoy's novel "Life is What You Make it".

Key Words-Human relationships, Individual, Society, Reality, Compassion, Bi-Polar Disorder

Relationships are the base of social fabric. They play a pivotal role in the development of an individual.If the relationship of an individual with others is good then the individual shows growth, if one's relationships are bad, then he or she deteriorates. In today's world one lives in a complex web of relationships. Ankita -- the central character of the novel is no exception. Preeti Shenoy, an Indian author based in Bangalore, is one such author who emphasizes the importance of values like love, trust and relationships along with that of faith and courage of an individual . An author of four consecutive bestselling works, Shenoy is well known in the literary arena as an active social commentator. "Her novel Life is What You Make It": a story of love, hope and how determination can overcome even destiny (2011) seems more inclined towards the existential values, the incorporation of which is much required for shearing the nihilistic tendencies that have crept in today's youth.

The novel is based on the protagonist Ankita Sharma. She has all the possible accomplishments that a young girl in her twenties can dream of. Blessed with captivating looks, smart and charming personality and talented disposition, Ankita seems to have been bestowed with all the possible blessings. Her life seems to blossom at its fullest. With tonnes of friends and boys swooning over her, she seems to have the world at her feet. The story begins as a flashback. We are shown letters that Ankita sends to Vaibhav and Vaibhav's reply. As the story moves, we come to know that Ankita's parents are very traditional and don't approve of her being with other guys, even if in a group, or allow her friends who are boys to call her at home. The significance of the essential life-values and relationships with family and friends based on trust and love is underscored by the novelist as she suggests that these are the very anchors on which an individual can rely in the times of distress. The story subtly suggests that it is the presence of these values that makes one's life truly fulfilling and satisfying. The world is indeed a better place where there is love, friendship, acceptance and hope, powered by these, one can indeed overcome anything, including destiny.

Society is a structure of relationships for the betterment of human society. Preeti Shenoy presents the same in "Life is What You Make it". Three boyfriends come in the life of Ankita. –Vaibhav, Abhi and Joseph. Ankita is a friend of Vaibhav, who is a part of her school gang. In the beginning, both

study at the school in Delhi but after 10+2 Ankita's father gets transferred to Cochin and she studies there. Vaibhav gets admission in I.I.T Delhi. Later on, they communicate only through letters. Ankita starts doing her graduation from a prestigious women's college, St. Agnes at Cochin. She becomes the secretary of Arts Association in her college. She comes in contact with a boy named Abhishek or Abhi from Mahaveer college- a co-ed college in connection with a function. Abhi develops infatuation for Ankita. He writes a love letter to her in blood. Her friend Suvi convinced her to meet Abhi as he had requested her. Suvi told Ankita that she was not married to Vaibhav that she has to tell everything to Vaibhav even about meeting Abhi. Slowly and steadily both develop a strong bond with each other during three years of graduation. After their graduation, both apply for MBA. Abhi gets admission in CUSAT i.e. Cochin University of Science and Technology only while Ankita gets a chance to do MBA from Bombay. Abhi wants her to do MBA at CUSAT but she prefers the better institute at Bombay. Abhi wants to marry her or at least wants a promise for marriage but Ankita doesn't want to promise anything and ignores him afterwards. He looked sad and requested her to keep in touch. After a day Ankita was stunned to know that Abhi had drowned in the sea because of high levels of alcohol in his body. Ankita regrets had she promised Abhi to keep in touch he would not have committed suicide. Had she assured she would meet him once in a year at Cochin, things would not have been so bad. The

relationship has to be reciprocal for growth, not one way. In Abhi-Ankita case, it grew critical and complex because the expectations from Abhi were more but the response from Ankita was less. That is why it had a tragic end. The incident left a message for Ankita never to belittle love wherever it comes from. Ankita committed a mistake by not looking at this problem from Abhi's perspective. Had she put herself in Abhi's shoes, she would have known where the shoe pinches. However Abhi was also at fault for he could not accept that things change. Whenever a girl thinks of her future with her boyfriend, it is normal. But when a boy thinks of his future with his girlfriend, he is serious. Preeti Shenoy seems to explore the hidden but real stance of relationships between young boys and girls. The relationships can cause every type of effect. It may be positive or vice-versa. After Abhi's death, Ankita suffers from Bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder is a brain disorder that causes dramatic shift in mood and energy levels. The person may feel high episode i.e. creativity is at its peak in this phase. Sometimes he feels low episode or emptiness. One starts thinking about suicide or death during this phase. In the beginning Ankita feels at the pinnacle of her creativity. She becomes a memory machine. She tops in the class. When her pain becomes unbearable, she pours out her feelings in a 42 page love letter to Suvi about her relationship with Abhi. During her MBA at Bombay, Ankita becomes friendly with her classmate, Joseph. She was trying to fill the void of Abhi with the help of Joseph's presence but she fails in her attempt.

Ankita thinks she has moved on and the happiness of work can get over the emotional trauma but there she makes the mistake. She is being appreciated and gets success, friends and everything but the pain she had been kept avoiding somewhere disturbs her. She starts behaving weirdly. Steadily start doing silly things like boozing and dancing at the top of terrace, getting in relationship with Joseph to feel the love she had for Abhi, studying day and night, making poems through the guilt. She saw Abhi in Joseph. She kisses him as if to correct the past, to bring back Abhi to life. When Ankita tells Joseph that she loves him. She actually declares;

“I loathed myself for lying to Joseph. I loathed myself for not having admitted the truth to Abhi. And I loathed myself for not being able to tell the whole truth to Vaibhav. I despised myself for getting involved with three different men.”

The guilt complex seems to be too heavy on Ankita's mind. There has always been an ideal representation of relationships of individuals especially with parent. But in the modern times, it has got some other reflections. Preeti Shenoy concentrates on some of the aspects which brings a change in this representation. Ankita's relationship with her parents is absolutely normal in the beginning but when Ankita's parents find out the love letters written by Vaibhav, they become angry and burn all the letter including that letter written in blood by Abhi. Human relationships have had a great place for strangers. These strangers



sometimes play more vital role than some of the blood based relationships.

All these incidents serve to catapult the U-turn of her life; she gradually starts feeling depressed and also ceases to attend her college. In her anxiety ridden state, she passes sleepless nights and in the worst of her fits, she attempts suicide twice. She is diagnosed with a mental ailment medically termed as Bipolar Disorder, a state of mind which is symptomized by dramatic mood shifts which dwindle between two phases namely the manic phase where the afflicted is bursting with energy and high spirits followed by depressive phase which often culminates to suicidal tendencies. Her deteriorating condition becomes a grave concern for her parents and they try to get her treated at any cost. She is admitted to the mental hospital and her grief, gloom and anxiety knows no limit once she is admitted there. Her life at this juncture seemed to be slipping out of her control because of the cruel plans of her destiny.

The age that we live in is proudly considered by us as one of the most progressive of the times. We take pride in tagging our times as modern, advanced, developed and virtually the best that has ever been experienced. The speakers, thinkers, philosophers and other luminaries of today seem to praise the age for its materialist accomplishments and the varied aspects of growth and development in a unanimous self-congratulatory mode. But there also exists another side of the coin. The age that we so fondly cherish is also

tinted with the dark and gloomy shades of sadistic happenings and occurrences that seem to mar the very splendour and the elegance of this developmental strand.

This generation, in all the practicality of its approach seems to be lagging behind in the strength to cope up with the pressures that today's hectic and frenzied lifestyle brings about with it. The scenario thus involves an ambiguity where it is impossible for one to decide whether to hail the profits or mourn the incumbent losses involved therein. Literature seems to be an apt response to the aforementioned dilemma, as beside a delineation of the same, it also strives to provide a suggestion, rather a possible solution to the existing issues experienced by the humanity in general and it would be no overestimation to assert that it can never fail to function as a guide, a torchbearer and a solution to these. Society and literature undeniably share a relationship of being complementary as well as supplementary to each other. At any given point of time, the society and the literature existing therein can be considered as complementary to each other. Being a faithful corollary of culture, literature can be seen as possessing the elements that, beside their capability of faithfully representing the inherent and apparent cultural traits, also hold the capability of providing an antidote to the supposed lacunae existing in the society. If on one hand society influences the literature through the existing norms, trends, manners and values, literature also functions to reinforce a current of ideas into

society through the minds and hearts of the readers and herein it supplements the intellectual fabric of the society. An author, like any other individual is very much a part of society, but what distinguishes him as an author is the faculty of keen observation of the phenomena occurring around him. He takes up an issue that strikes his sensibility and that he feels should be communicated to others in order to convey a set of values or a vision. One of the major motives behind such a communication is a strong urge to shatter the stereotypical notions and the flawed set of opinions that he perceives to be existing in his surroundings. A modern writer is no exception to the same.

But Ankita who is the central figure finds considerable support in the doctor, another stranger of her life, who deals with her case. She is sympathetically told by the doctor that she is affected by a very interesting state of mind that is very much common with sensitive and talented personalities. The soothing words of the doctor serve to relieve her anxiety to an extent;

“Creativity is closely associated with bipolar disorder. This condition is unique. Many famous historical figures and artists have had this. Yet they have led a full life and contributed so much to the society and world at large. See, you have a gift. People with bipolar disorder are very very sensitive... They are able to experience emotions in a very deep and intense way. It gives them a very different perspective of the world. It is not that they lose touch with reality. But the feelings of extreme intensity

are manifested in creating things. They pour their emotions into either writing or whatever field they have chosen.”

She says;

“He truly cared and that made all the difference. It is indeed amazing how words and kindness have the power to heal.”

Dr. Madhusudan inspired Ankita through his own story. It was because of his sister's suicide that he wanted to study psychiatry and help people get out of mental problems. He tells her that life is a gift. We should not throw it away. He tells Ankita;

“Nothing is lost just because you dropped out of MBA. It is not the be-all and end-all of life. You can still do other things in life.”

This idea gave an option, an alternative which she had not even thought about. Dr. Madhusudan tells Ankita she has a great gift for writing. Her paintings are also very good. When Ankita enquires how he knows about it, Dr. Madhusudan tells her about a 42 page letter she had written to Suvi. At first, Ankita felt shocked to know that her secrets are known to everyone. But later on she felt a strange kind of relief because there was nothing she could hide from Dr. Madhusudan now. Dr. Madhusudan informed Ankita that she was suffering from Bipolar disorder and she could manage it. Ankita believed him completely. She says; “Sometimes all one needs is a strong anchor, a person you can trust blindly. Someone who will lead you on, be there for you and never let you down. To me Dr. Madhusudan was that person.”



Dr. Madhusudan acts like a perfect doctor, an ideal one whose behaviour and conduct gave Ankita a lifeline. When Ankita recovers and leaves the mental hospital, she gives Dr. Madhusudan a card on which was written;

“I owe you a lot. You have taught me the value of life.”

The regular rounds of counselling that she had with the doctor and his team along with her disciplined lifestyle including reading sessions, yoga and other outdoor activities teamed up with medication enabled her to regain her lost faith and trust in her abilities. She began working on her painting skills that she used to be good at previously. In the course of six months there at the institute, she also befriended a couple of co-patients and developed a sort of bond with them based on mutual trust, support, compassion and understanding. Within six months, she seemed to emerge from her bleak past in a completely transformed manner. The counselling and the warm support that she receives from the people at the institute helps her to redefine herself and to grow up in terms of relationships, beliefs and values. Through all that she undergoes she learns that life is not to be taken as granted but is to be cherished as the most precious attribute bestowed to one. She grows up in relation to her understanding of values inherent in making a life truly worth living and also in her ability to comprehend the beauty and charm of life when it abounds in love, care and affection of and for the loved ones. She remarks that from

the time onwards she would never belittle love from whichever source it comes, and try to be more sympathetic towards the feelings and emotions of those at the giving end. She learns the importance of sharing and caring for others;

“If you do not laugh for a day, if you have not made somebody's day happier, if you've not appreciated something good that has happened to you and if you have not felt thankful to be alive, then you have wasted that day of your life on earth.”

The epilogue at the end of the novel traces the life of Ankita eighteen years later and shows her to have earned six more degrees and still in quest for more knowledge, happily married and to have excelled in her talent of portraiture.

Preeti Shenoy's effort to bring harmony among relationships especially out of blood based relationship seems excellent in the novel. In fact, it opens a gate for the new relationships among the people whom people call strangers' or unknown people'. Friendships have major forms of representation of innovative human relationships. Ankita's relationship with her classmates and friends is cordial and supportive. At mental hospital, Anuj and Sagar used to talk to her about movies and books. Nobody asked questions about anyone's past. This gave Ankita a feeling of security otherwise she would have gone in to her own shell. Anuj and Sagar gave examples of other people in the mental hospital who were in problem, to comfort her that she was not alone. They made her

feel okay. Ankita wanted to be a business tycoon but due to severe Bipolar disorder becomes unable to read and write. She was able to get out of this critical situation by her strong faith and relationship with Dr. Madhusudan, her friends Anuj and Sagar at mental hospital and support by her parents. Thus, it becomes evident that literature exhibits relationships based on both internal and external affairs. Different kinds of relationships form the basis of this novel – manwoman relationships, love complications, heartbreaks and relationships with parents. It is mandatory to strike a fine balance between intellect and emotion or between head and heart for a stable relationship. Ankita lets the relationship with Abhi slip out of her hands because of lack of proper communication but Dr. Madhusudan gets her out of this crisis. Ankita's confession to Viabhav also helps her overcome the trauma. In this way, the novel is exceptional for it has modern relationship dilemma. It touches our strings of heart because it has emotional connection and makes realistic reading experience.

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