

## **Role and Significance of Relationships in Preeti Shenoy's** *Life is What You Make it*

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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. Suneel Seema reflects this very idea in the book, *Man-Woman Relationship in Indian Fiction*, "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"(8). 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. Subba Rao M. has rightly stated:

If literature is the recording of human contacts and the relationships rising from these contacts, it cannot possibly evade or miss the contact of man and woman, impact and effect and his recording the feminine personality cannot but come in for full unfolding. In the great works of literature, irrespective of language, region or time, and written by men, woman gets portrayed in archetypal lineaments without impairment of her subjection along with ail else to the larger laws of existence. (5)

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 the role and significance of relationship in Preeti Shenoy's novel *Life is What You Make it*. 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- 21 years old girl is no exception. The paper investigates her life in terms of four different kinds of relationships:

1. Ankita's relationship with her boyfriends.
2. Ankita's relationship with her mother and father.
3. Ankita's relationship with Dr. Madhusudan.

#### 4. Ankita's relationship with her classmates/friends.

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 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 at 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 says, "Oh Abhi I can't promise anything. I wish I could" (Shenoy 76). 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' (Shenoy

101). She tops the MBA class in Bombay. 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. She saw Abhi in Joseph. She kisses him as if to right 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” (Shenoy 111). 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 Abhi and Viabhav, they thundered with rage. Ankita’s father calls Abhi “a mad bastard”.( Shenoy 116) Ankita’s mother crosses all limits of modest behaviour and calls her “shameless whore”.( Shenoy 116) She asks, “How many guys will you trap with your wily charms, you stupid little tramp?”( Shenoy 117). Ankita felt however that it was actually the boys who had pursued her. She had not trapped them But as the conflict of a middle class girl has, Ankita is caught between tradition and modernity. The harsh words of Ankita’s mother had a very bad impact on her mental health as she says, “...my mother had struck at the very core of my self -esteem and shattered it to pieces. I could not even pick up the bits.”( Shenoy 118) When Ankita’s father burnt her love letters she felt empty and hollow. She felt defeated. She wanted to curl up and die. Something inside her died with the burning of letters as she herself confesses, “Perhaps it was a part of my soul”( Shenoy 121). Tackling a issue like this in a traditional family set-up where you are more concerned about societal attitude i.e. what people will say, can be problematic. Had Ankita been talked to politely and dealt with softly her situation would not be worse The role played by Ankita’s mother is not up to the mark. She could have been more amicable and friendly. After this episode, Ankita’s mental health changes from worse to worst. She could not read now. She was dead inside. She started contemplating suicide Ankita tried to commit suicide by jumping off terrace but was saved by her father. Seeing the other aspect of behaviour of Ankita’s mother, why she behaved so badly is because there is societal pressure. You want to safeguard your respect and family name. As Dr. Madhusudan says about Kerela, “So you know how society is there and how much family name matters in a place like that. It is sometimes all that they have got”(Shenoy 168). When Ankita finally recovers and comes to stay at Bombay with her parents, they had grown more open towards her friends. They had realised that her friends had played an important part in her life.

Human relationships have had a great place for strangers. These strangers sometimes play more vital role than some of the blood based relationships. At mental hospital Dr. Madhusudan acted as the lifeline for Ankita .She says,“He truly cared and that made all the difference. It is indeed amazing how words and kindness have the power to heal”(Shenoy 166). 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 one 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 thing in life”(Shenoy168). 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 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”( Shenoy 182). 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” (Shenoy 194). 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. 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 is 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 — man-woman 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.

### Works Cited

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