Masculine Paradigms and Feminist Perspectives: Unveiling Male Archetypes in Preeti Shenoy's Literary Universe

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Abstract

In *"Masculine Paradigms and Feminist Perspectives: Unveiling Male Archetypes in Preeti Shenoy's Literary Universe,"* explores the representation of male characters in the novels of acclaimed Indian author Preeti Shenoy through the lens of the feminist literary theory. Shenoy's works are renowned for their rich characterizations and emotional depth, but their portrayal of masculinity offers a unique opportunity to examine traditional and evolving gender norms within a contemporary context.

This study analyzes how Shenoy's male characters embody and challenge conventional masculine archetypes, and how these representations interact with feminist ideals of gender equality, identity, and power dynamics. By scrutinizing characters across a range of Shenoy's novels, the paper seeks to uncover the ways in which these male figures either reinforce or subvert societal expectations of masculinity. It also explores the broader implications of these portrayals for understanding gender relations in modern literature.

The paper looks at male characters through a feminist lens, studying their roles, actions, and connections with the women in the story. It aims to provide a comprehensive view of how Shenoy's narratives contribute to the discourse on gender norms, offering insights into both the reinforcement of traditional male roles and the potential for progressive re-definitions within her literary world. Through this analysis, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary South Asian literature and highlights the role of feminist critique in reshaping literary masculinity.

Keywords: Archetype, Emotional Labour, Feminist Lens, Progressive Masculinity.

Introduction

Preeti Shenoy, one of India's bestselling contemporary authors, is well known for her sharp understanding of human relationships, emotions, and the changing roles of women in today's society. Her novels often delve into the complexities of personal growth, love, relationships, and the impact of societal expectations, offering a rich landscape for feminist literary analysis. Shenoy's writing reflects the struggles and triumphs of the modern Indian woman, set against the backdrop of patriarchal norms, with a particular emphasis on how relationships with male characters shape their journeys. Relationship dynamics plays a vital role in critically examining the male charterers of novels.

In novels like *The Secret Wishlist* and *Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake*, Shenoy portrays complex male characters who represent different forms of masculinity. These characters range from those who reinforce patriarchal ideals, limiting women's autonomy, to those who support women's aspirations and emotional needs, offering an alternative vision of progressive masculinity. By examining these male characters through both feminist and anti-feminist lenses, Shenoy's work reveals the gendered power dynamics that define many relationships in contemporary India.

The Secret Wishlist explores the desires of a woman trapped in a loveless marriage, examining how societal expectations and male authority suppress female autonomy. The male protagonist represents a deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset, where control over a woman's life is seen as natural and unquestioned. In contrast, Shenoy introduces male characters who challenge these traditional roles, advocating for emotional freedom and equality within relationships.

In *Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake*, the male characters serve as catalysts in the protagonist's journey toward self-discovery. Samir represents the conventional, anti-feminist male, whose actions and attitudes reflect the controlling and emotionally distant traits often associated with toxic masculinity. On the other hand, Akash provides a feminist counterpoint—offering support, empathy, and a partnership based on mutual respect. These contrasting depictions of masculinity allow for a deeper exploration of the power dynamics at play in male-female relationships.

This research paper, titled *Masculine Paradigms and Feminist Perspectives: Unveiling Male Archetypes in Preeti Shenoy's Literary Universe*, seeks to analyze these varied depictions of male characters through a feminist lens. The study will explore how Shenoy constructs both feminist and anti-feminist male characters, revealing the role they play in either perpetuating or challenging the patriarchal structures within which her female protagonists strive for independence and self-realization. By examining these male archetypes, this paper aims to shed light on Shenoy's broader commentary on gender, power, and emotional dynamics in modern Indian relationships.

❖ *Tea for two and a piece of cake*

It is a contemporary romance novel that follows the journey of Nisha, a woman whose life takes an unexpected turn when her seemingly perfect marriage falls apart. The story explores her struggles with self-worth, independence, and rebuilding her life after being abandoned by her husband, Samir. Along the way, she encounters Akash, who offers her emotional support and a second chance at love. The novel delves into themes of resilience, personal growth, and the impact of male relationships on a woman's journey toward self-discovery.

Shenoy presents two contrasting male characters who play pivotal roles in Nisha's life, highlighting different aspects of societal expectations and gender roles. **Samir**, Nisha's husband, represents a traditional, patriarchal mindset, where women are often seen as inferior and their roles limited to supporting men. His decision to leave

Nisha, when she no longer fits his ideal image of a perfect wife, reflects a deeper societal belief that a woman's worth is tied to her utility in a man's life. Through a feminist lens reveals his embodiment of patriarchal values that limit female autonomy and reinforce traditional gender roles. At the beginning of the novel, Samir appears to be a charming and successful partner, seemingly the ideal man for Nisha. However, as the narrative unfolds, his true nature surfaces—one that aligns with a conventional, patriarchal mindset.

Samir's relationship with Nisha is rooted in control and convenience rather than mutual respect. He marries Nisha, who is younger, less experienced, and in awe of him, reflecting how patriarchal relationships often thrive on unequal power dynamics. His abandonment of Nisha once she no longer fits his ideal image of a "perfect" wife reveals his conditional affection, where a woman's value is based on her ability to fulfill certain societal roles—youthful, physically appealing, and subservient to male desires. Sameer's abandonment of Nisha during the crucial period of motherhood, when she was most vulnerable, exemplifies toxic masculinity that disregards women's emotional and personal needs.

From a feminist perspective, Samir represents the male figure who benefits from and perpetuates patriarchal systems, where women's independence and aspirations are secondary to men's desires. His treatment of Nisha reflects how patriarchal society often discards women when they no longer fulfill predefined roles, forcing them into a journey of self-reliance and empowerment, as seen in Nisha's evolution post-divorce. Samir serves as a critique of the ways in which patriarchy devalues women, especially in the context of relationships, where they are often seen as replaceable or only valuable within the confines of traditional gender norms.

Here are some textual quotes from *Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake* that can strengthen the feminist analysis of Samir's character:

I. Samir's superficial affection and control:

"He liked the way I admired him, and I thought he was the perfect husband. I tried to mold myself to fit into his world, but it was never enough."

This quote highlights the imbalance in their relationship, where Nisha is expected to conform to Samir's expectations, reflecting how patriarchal relationships often demand women to adapt to male desires and preferences.

II. Conditional love and abandonment:

"I felt like I was no longer good enough for him, as though he had outgrown me, and I had ceased to be the person he had married."

This passage emphasizes Samir's attitude toward Nisha, suggesting that once she no longer fits his idealized version of a wife, he loses interest. It underscores how patriarchy devalues women once they are perceived as not fulfilling traditional roles.

III. Samir's decision to leave:

"I need something more in life. You and this marriage are not enough anymore."

This direct admission by Samir reveals his self-centered view of the relationship, treating Nisha and their marriage as dispensable when they no longer serve his personal desires. His statement encapsulates the patriarchal notion that men's ambitions and emotional needs take precedence over women's.

IV. Nisha's realization of inequality:

"I had built my entire world around him, and he just walked away as if none of it mattered."

This reflection from Nisha highlights the emotional toll of the unequal power dynamic in their relationship, where her devotion and dependence were met with indifference. It underscores how women in patriarchal relationships are often left behind once their usefulness is deemed insufficient.

These quotes reinforce the argument that Samir embodies patriarchal ideals, where women are valued based on their ability to conform to traditional gender roles, and once they fail to meet these expectations, they are discarded.

On the other hand, **Akash**, who enters Nisha's life after her divorce, offers a stark contrast. He represents a modern, open-minded perspective, where men and women are seen as equals. Akash supports Nisha's personal growth, encouraging her independence and emotional healing, making him a symbol of progressive masculinity in the novel. Akash, unlike Nisha's first husband Samir, embodies a more egalitarian and empathetic approach to relationships, fostering Nisha's independence and personal growth, which aligns with feminist ideals.

Support for Female Autonomy and Growth:

From the moment Akash enters Nisha's life, he serves as a supportive and understanding figure, offering her emotional space to heal from her previous toxic relationship. Rather than imposing expectations or trying to mold Nisha into a particular role, Akash encourages her to rediscover herself. This is evident in the way he respects her choices and acknowledges her individuality. In a feminist context, Akash's behavior aligns with the idea of relationships being partnerships of equals, where both individuals support each other's growth rather than reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies.

Emotional Labor and Empathy:

Akash exhibits qualities that challenge traditional masculinity, particularly his capacity for emotional labor. He is sensitive to Nisha's needs and provides her with emotional support without asserting dominance or control. Feminist theory often critiques toxic masculinity, which discourages men from showing vulnerability or emotional depth, but Akash defies these stereotypes. His emotional availability and willingness to engage in Nisha's healing process reflect a feminist-friendly model of masculinity, where men contribute to relationships not just by fulfilling material needs but by offering emotional partnership.

Promoting Equality in Relationships:

A key aspect of Akash's character is his respect for Nisha as an equal. Unlike Samir, who viewed Nisha as a means to satisfy his desires and conform to societal expectations, Akash treats her with dignity and sees her as a person with her own dreams and challenges.

His approach to the relationship mirrors feminist ideals of equality, where power dynamics are balanced, and both partners contribute equally to the emotional and practical aspects of the relationship.

In contrast to Samir's patriarchal control, Akash's role in Nisha's life embodies a more feminist form of masculinity that promotes gender equality, emotional intimacy, and respect for women's autonomy. He supports Nisha without undermining her independence, making him a progressive male figure in Shenoy's narrative. Through Akash's character, Shenoy offers a vision of relationships where both partners thrive, free from the constraints of traditional gender roles.

Here are some textual quotes from *Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake* that support the feminist analysis of Akash's character:

I.   Akash's emotional support and understanding:

"With Akash, I didn't feel the need to pretend. He accepted me as I was, without any judgments or expectations."

This quote highlights how Akash respects Nisha's individuality, contrasting with the controlling nature of her previous relationship with Samir. His acceptance aligns with feminist ideals of equality and respect in relationships.

ll. Encouraging Nisha's independence:

"He never tried to make me feel small or dependent. Instead, he constantly encouraged me to pursue my dreams and live for myself."

This passage underscores Akash's role as a supportive figure, promoting Nisha's autonomy and personal growth, which is a crucial aspect of feminist relationships.

lll. Akash's emotional availability:

"He listened, really listened, to everything I had to say, as if my words mattered. It was something I wasn't used to, and it made me feel valued."

This illustrates Akash's emotional investment in Nisha, demonstrating a stark contrast to toxic masculinity. His emotional labor reflects a feminist model of partnership based on mutual respect and understanding.

lV. Equality in the relationship:

"With Akash, it wasn't about who was right or wrong. It was about finding a way forward, together."
This quote encapsulates the balance in their relationship, where both partners work together as equals, rather than one person asserting control or dominance. This egalitarian dynamic is a key aspect of feminist partnerships.

These quotes highlight Akash's role as a supportive, emotionally available partner who values Nisha's autonomy and promotes an equal relationship, making him a model of progressive masculinity in the novel.

These two characters embody the conflict between outdated patriarchal norms and evolving ideas of gender equality, as noted in Shenoy's exploration of society.

❖ *The Secret Wishlist*

Novel explores themes of female agency, societal expectations, and personal liberation. The protagonist, Diksha, is trapped in a loveless, patriarchal marriage where her desires and individuality are suppressed. Her journey to rediscover her dreams and reclaim her life reflects a feminist struggle for autonomy in a male-dominated world. The novel critiques the traditional roles imposed on women, emphasizing the importance of self-empowerment and breaking free from societal constraints. Diksha's pursuit of her secret wishlist becomes a symbol of resistance against patriarchal control, celebrating the feminist ideals of self-discovery and independence.

In *The Secret Wishlist* by Preeti Shenoy, the characters of **Sandeep** (Diksha's husband) and **Ankit** (her lover) offer contrasting representations of masculinity, analyzed through a feminist lens. These two men reflect the opposing forces of patriarchy and progressive gender dynamics in Diksha's life, highlighting the tension between control and liberation in her personal journey.

Sandeep embodiment of patriarchal control and traditional gender roles, which confine Diksha to a life of domesticity and emotional suppression. Sandeep is portrayed as a conventional, patriarchal figure who expects his wife to conform to societal norms of being an obedient and subservient wife, reflecting the gendered power dynamics prevalent in many marriages.

Reinforcement of Patriarchal Expectations:

Sandeep's character highlights the oppressive nature of traditional masculinity, where a woman's role is confined to taking care of the home and fulfilling her husband's needs. He shows little regard for Diksha's individuality or personal aspirations, treating her as an extension of his household rather than as a partner with her own dreams. His expectation that Diksha will continue to live a life of routine and sacrifice demonstrates how patriarchy limits women's autonomy, enforcing rigid gender roles that trap them in unfulfilling relationships.

Emotional Detachment and Lack of Empathy:

Sandeep's emotional detachment and inability to recognize Diksha's inner turmoil reflect a typical patriarchal attitude, where men are expected to be emotionally distant and unconcerned with their wives' emotional well-being. He is dismissive of Diksha's desires and personal growth, illustrating the ways in which patriarchal structures often disregard women's emotional needs and aspirations. His failure to support or encourage Diksha's individuality is a key aspect of the feminist critique of his character.

Symbol of Oppression and Lack of Female Agency:

Sandeep's character symbolizes the societal forces that oppress women and deny them agency. Throughout the marriage, Diksha is made to feel invisible and voiceless, with her choices and wishes subordinated to Sandeep's expectations. Feminist theory critiques this imbalance of power, where women are often stripped of their agency in relationships that prioritize male authority and control. Sandeep embodies

this dynamic, reinforcing the barriers that prevent Diksha from pursuing her own happiness and self-fulfillment.

In summary, Sandeep's character represents the patriarchal forces that restrict women's agency, emotional expression, and personal growth, positioning him as an antagonist to Diksha's journey toward self-empowerment. His behavior reflects the traditional gender norms that feminists challenge, highlighting the need for women's independence and equal partnerships in relationships.

Here are some textual quotes from T*he Secret Wishlist* to support the feminist analysis of Sandeep:

Sandeep's Patriarchal Control:

l. Sandeep's emotional detachment:

"Sandeep barely noticed me anymore. To him, I was just the person who ran the house, not someone with dreams or desires of her own."

This quote shows how Sandeep views Diksha merely as a functional part of his life, reflecting patriarchal attitudes that disregard women's individuality.

ll. Sandeep's lack of empathy for Diksha's desires:
"You have everything you could possibly want. What more could you need?"

Sandeep's inability to recognize Diksha's emotional needs reinforces his role as a patriarchal figure, dismissing her deeper desires for self-fulfillment.

lll. Diksha's realization of inequality:

"I had spent years living by his rules, doing what was expected, and never questioning anything. But now I was suffocating."

This line highlights the power imbalance in their marriage, where Diksha feels trapped by Sandeep's expectations, a clear reflection of patriarchal domination.

These quotes reflect the stark contrast between Sandeep's patriarchal control and Ankit's progressive support, highlighting Shenoy's critique of traditional gender roles and her advocacy for feminist ideals of personal autonomy and equality in relationships.

Through a feminist lens reveals him as a character who challenges traditional gender roles and embodies progressive masculinity. Ankit represents the kind of male figure who supports women's autonomy and personal growth, in contrast to the patriarchal attitudes seen in Diksha's husband, Sandeep.

Respect for Female Autonomy

Ankit treats Diksha as an equal, valuing her opinions and desires, which stands in stark contrast to the controlling nature of her husband. He respects her right to make her own decisions, particularly in relation to her happiness and personal fulfillment. Rather than imposing his own expectations or trying to mold her into a particular role, Ankit supports Diksha's journey toward reclaiming her identity and pursuing her long-buried dreams. His approach embodies feminist ideals of equality in relationships, where both partners are free to express their individuality.

Emotional Availability and Mutual Respect

Ankit's emotional availability is another key aspect of his character that aligns with feminist ideals. He listens to Diksha, validates her feelings, and offers her the emotional support she has long been denied in her marriage. In feminist terms, this challenges the toxic masculinity often found in traditional gender roles, where men are expected to be emotionally distant and assert dominance over their partners. Ankit's empathy and understanding create a space where Diksha feels heard and valued, making him a more progressive and feminist-friendly partner.

Encouragement of Self-Discovery

Throughout the novel, Ankit encourages Diksha to break free from the societal expectations that have confined her. He urges her to pursue her dreams and take control of her own happiness, symbolizing a rejection of the patriarchal belief that women's lives should revolve around their roles as wives and mothers. Ankit's support of Diksha's self-empowerment reflects feminist ideals, where women are encouraged to prioritize their own goals and well-being rather than sacrificing them for the sake of others.

In contrast to Diksha's husband, Ankit represents a healthier, more egalitarian model of masculinity, one that aligns with feminist principles of mutual respect, emotional equality, and the recognition of women's right to self-determination. Through Ankit's character, Shenoy critiques traditional, patriarchal relationships and offers a vision of partnerships based on equality and emotional fulfillment.

Here are some textual quotes from *The Secret Wishlist* that support the feminist analysis of Ankit's character:

Ankit's Progressive Masculinity:

l. Respect for Female Autonomy:

"I am not here to tell you what to do. Only you can decide what makes you truly happy."

This quote shows Ankit's respect for Diksha's autonomy, allowing her to make her own decisions without imposing his desires on her. It reflects feminist ideals of equality in relationships.

ll. Emotional Availability:

"With Ankit, I felt heard and understood, as if my thoughts and feelings actually mattered."

This line demonstrates how Ankit listens to and values Diksha's emotions, contrasting with the emotional neglect she experiences in her marriage. His emotional availability is a key aspect of his progressive masculinity.

lll. Encouragement of Self-Discovery:

"You were always meant for more, Diksha. I always knew you had dreams, and it's never too late to chase them."

Ankit encourages Diksha to pursue her long-suppressed dreams, symbolizing his support of her self-empowerment. This aligns with feminist ideas that advocate for women's independence and personal fulfillment.

lV. Breaking Free from Societal Expectations:

"You don't have to live by the rules others set for you. You have every right to live life on your own terms."

This quote emphasizes Ankit's role in helping Diksha break free from societal expectations and reclaim her individuality, promoting feminist ideals of autonomy and liberation.

These quotes illustrate how Ankit's character challenges traditional gender norms and supports Diksha's empowerment, aligning with feminist principles of equality, emotional intimacy, and respect for women's agency.

From a feminist perspective, Ankit's character represents the potential for equality and emotional intimacy in relationships, contrasting sharply with Sandeep's controlling and detached approach. Through these two male figures, Shenoy critiques the suffocating impact of patriarchal marriages and advocates for relationships that are based on mutual respect, equality, and personal growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research paper delves into the nuanced portrayal of male characters across Shenoy's novels, offering a critical examination through feminist lenses. Shenoy's depiction of male characters—ranging from the patriarchal control of Sandeep in *The Secret Wishlist* to the emotionally supportive Ankit in *The One You Cannot Have*, and the evolving masculinity of Akash in *Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake*—reveals a

spectrum of masculinities that interact with feminist ideals in varied ways.

Through Sandeep, Shenoy critiques traditional patriarchal norms that confine women to submissive roles and deny them autonomy, illustrating the detrimental impact of such relationships on women's emotional well-being. Conversely, characters like Ankit and Akash represent more progressive models of masculinity, where respect for women's independence, emotional vulnerability, and support for personal growth are central. Ankit's encouragement of emotional honesty and respect for women's choices, alongside Akash's nurturing and egalitarian approach, reflect a departure from traditional gender roles, aligning with feminist ideals of equality and mutual respect in relationships.

Shenoy's work, therefore, not only challenges entrenched patriarchal paradigms but also offers a vision of masculinities that accommodate emotional depth and egalitarian values. By juxtaposing these contrasting male archetypes, Shenoy contributes to a broader discourse on gender dynamics, highlighting the potential for transformative relationships that uphold feminist principles. This exploration underscores the importance of evolving masculinities in fostering more equitable and fulfilling partnerships, advocating for a redefinition of gender roles that support both emotional integrity and mutual respect.

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