

Book Review**From Silent Struggle to Bold Reclamation: A Psychoanalytic and Feminist Reading of *The Secret Wishlist*****Sudeeksha S Pai.¹ & A. Lourdusamy²**¹Research Scholar,
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University, Mangalore, India.**Abstract**

Preeti Shenoy's *The Secret Wishlist* is a poignant narrative of transformation, capturing the journey of its protagonist, Diksha, from silent compliance to bold self-reclamation. Framed within the psychoanalytic theories of repression and individuation, the novel unravels the layers of Diksha's suppressed desires and the societal norms that have stifled her true identity. The narrative also resonates deeply with feminist principles, as it critiques the rigid gender roles that limit women's autonomy and portrays the courage required to break free from patriarchal constraints. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, Diksha's repressed passions symbolized by her love for dance—are explored as metaphors for self-expression, leading to her eventual individuation. Simultaneously, the feminist perspective highlights her resistance against societal expectations and her journey toward empowerment. This study investigates how Shenoy's portrayal of Diksha challenges conventional narratives about marriage, womanhood, and self-fulfilment, offering a compelling critique of patriarchal structures. The novel emerges as a celebration of women's resilience and the transformative power of reclaiming one's agency.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Repression, Empowerment, Individuality**Introduction**

Preeti Shenoy has established herself as one of India's most celebrated contemporary authors, weaving stories that explore the intricacies of relationships, individuality, and self-discovery. Her novel *The Secret Wishlist* (2012) is a poignant narrative of a woman's journey from societal conformity to personal liberation. At its core, the novel delves into the protagonist Diksha's suppressed desires and her eventual decision to break free from the shackles of an unfulfilling marriage. The narrative resonates with readers who grapple with societal expectations while yearning for individuality.

Diksha, the protagonist, epitomizes the struggle many women face in balancing societal norms and personal aspirations. A teenager full of dreams and potential, her life takes an unexpected turn when she is thrust into a marriage dictated by convention rather than choice.

The novel explores the consequences of such societal decisions, highlighting the emotional toll they exact. Through Diksha's transformation, Shenoy raises critical questions about identity, gender roles, and the courage it takes to embrace one's true self.

This article aims to examine *The Secret Wishlist* through the lens of thematic exploration, character development, and psychoanalytic theory. By analysing Diksha's psychological journey, the article will uncover deeper insights into the narrative's relevance. Comparisons with Shenoy's other works and the broader implications of the novel in contemporary Indian society will also be discussed, offering a holistic understanding of the text.

Preeti Shenoy is a celebrated author in contemporary Indian literature, known for her exploration of relationships, individuality, and the emotional complexities of life. Her works, such as *Life Is What You Make It* (2011) and *Wake Up, Life Is Calling* (2019), delve into the psyche of individuals navigating societal pressures. *The Secret Wishlist* (2012) continues this tradition, focusing on Diksha, a woman who reclaims her sense of self after years of conformity. The novel reflects a universal struggle of women seeking liberation from societal expectations while negotiating personal aspirations. Shenoy's simple yet evocative narrative style ensures that the story resonates with readers from diverse backgrounds.

Diksha, the protagonist, begins her life as an ambitious teenager brimming with dreams. However, a romantic entanglement and a series of unfortunate events lead her to a life of domesticity, far removed from her earlier aspirations. Her marriage, marked by monotony and emotional detachment, mirrors the lives of countless women trapped in unfulfilling relationships. Shenoy poignantly depicts the silent suffering that defines Diksha's life, juxtaposing her present circumstances with glimpses of her vibrant past. This dichotomy is central to the novel's emotional appeal and its exploration of identity and self-reclamation.

This article seeks to critically analyse *The Secret Wishlist* by examining its thematic depth, character development, and psychological undertones. Using psychoanalytic theory, the article will uncover Diksha's internal conflicts and her eventual journey toward self-actualization. In addition, the narrative will be situated within the broader context of Shenoy's oeuvre and contemporary Indian literature. The themes of liberation, individuality, and societal critique will be explored in detail, highlighting the novel's relevance to contemporary readers.

The title, *The Secret Wishlist*, encapsulates the essence of the novel—hidden desires and the courage to pursue them. Diksha's wish list is both literal and symbolic, representing the dreams she buried under the weight of societal expectations. Shenoy uses this motif to frame the narrative, inviting readers to reflect on their unfulfilled aspirations. The act of writing a wish list becomes a transformative moment for Diksha, signalling the beginning of her rebellion against a stifling existence. This theme of suppressed desires and their eventual articulation is central to the novel's impact.

Preeti Shenoy skilfully intertwines individual struggles with societal critique. Diksha's life is shaped by external pressures—her family's insistence on propriety, the societal emphasis on

marriage as a woman's ultimate goal, and the stigma attached to unconventional choices. Through Diksha's experiences, Shenoy critiques these norms, urging readers to question their validity. The novel's success lies in its ability to balance personal narrative with broader social commentary, making it both intimate and universal.

The relevance of *The Secret Wishlist* extends beyond its immediate narrative. In contemporary Indian society, where traditional values often clash with modern aspirations, the novel serves as a mirror and a guide. Diksha's story inspires readers to confront their fears and embrace change. Shenoy's nuanced portrayal of a woman's journey toward empowerment resonates with individuals striving to balance personal desires and societal expectations. The article will explore these dimensions, offering insights into the novel's enduring appeal.

Diksha's transformation from a submissive housewife to an independent woman forms the crux of the novel. Shenoy's portrayal of this journey is nuanced and realistic, capturing the emotional and psychological hurdles that accompany such change. The narrative does not romanticize rebellion; instead, it emphasizes the strength and resilience required to challenge deeply ingrained norms. Diksha's growth is gradual, marked by moments of doubt and introspection. This realism adds depth to the novel, making Diksha's journey relatable and inspiring.

The theme of self-discovery is intricately woven into the narrative. Diksha's wishlist, initially a private exercise, becomes a roadmap for her transformation. Each item on the list represents a step toward reclaiming her identity. Shenoy uses this device to illustrate the importance of setting personal goals and taking actionable steps toward them. Diksha's journey underscores the power of self-awareness and determination in overcoming adversity.

This article will delve into these themes, examining how Shenoy uses Diksha's story to advocate for individuality and self-expression. The psychoanalytic lens will further illuminate Diksha's internal conflicts, providing a deeper understanding of her motivations and choices. By analysing Diksha's journey, the article will uncover the broader implications of *The Secret Wishlist* in the context of gender, identity, and societal change.

One of the most striking themes in *The Secret Wishlist* is the suppression of desires under societal expectations. Diksha's life is emblematic of how cultural norms often stifle individuality, especially for women. In the early chapters, she reflects, *"I was not unhappy, but I wasn't happy either. It was as though I had forgotten what happiness truly meant."* This sentiment encapsulates the silent discontent that many experiences in lives dictated by duty rather than choice. The contrast between Diksha's youthful aspirations and her current monotonous life highlights the impact of such suppression on personal identity.

Shenoy's narrative illustrates how desires, even when suppressed, remain potent forces within individuals. Diksha's rediscovery of her long-forgotten dreams begins when she writes her wish list, a symbolic act of reclaiming agency. The list represents her inner voice, long silenced by societal constraints. *"It was just a silly list," Diksha remarks, "but for the first time in*

years, I felt alive." This transformation demonstrates the liberating power of articulating one's desires, even in the face of overwhelming opposition.

The theme of unfulfilled potential is explored through Diksha's reflection on her youthful romance with Ankit. Their relationship, abruptly ended by familial pressures, represents a pivotal moment when Diksha's life diverged from her true self. Shenoy poignantly writes, *There are moments in life when we make decisions, not knowing they will define our entire existence.* This theme resonates with readers who have grappled with choices shaped by external forces, emphasizing the importance of introspection and authenticity.

The novel delves deeply into the complexities of relationships, particularly the constraints imposed by traditional marital roles. Diksha's marriage to Sandeep is portrayed as a transactional arrangement devoid of emotional intimacy. *We were like two strangers living under the same roof, bound by a paper that meant little to either of us,* Diksha observes, underscoring the emptiness of her relationship. Through this portrayal, Shenoy critiques the societal expectation that women must endure such marriages for the sake of appearances.

Friendship, in contrast, emerges as a redemptive force in Diksha's life. Her reconnection with her childhood friend, Vibha, provides her with the encouragement and support she needs to pursue her dreams. Vibha's advice, *Life is too short to live for others. You owe it to yourself to be happy,* becomes a catalyst for Diksha's transformation. The novel underscores the importance of meaningful connections in fostering personal growth, positioning friendship as a counterpoint to the alienation of her marriage.

Through Diksha's relationship with her son, Shenoy explores the theme of generational empathy and understanding. While initially hesitant to embrace change, Diksha finds strength in her role as a mother. Her decision to pursue happiness is motivated in part by her desire to set an example for her son. *I didn't want him to grow up thinking that it was okay to live a half-life,* she reflects. This dynamic adds depth to the narrative, highlighting the interplay between personal and familial responsibilities.

The pursuit of liberation and self-discovery is central to the novel, marking Diksha's journey from conformity to empowerment. Writing the wish list is an act of defiance against societal norms, symbolizing her commitment to reclaiming her identity. *Each item on the list was a piece of me I had lost,* Diksha reveals, encapsulating the transformative power of small, deliberate actions. The novel's emphasis on personal agency aligns with contemporary feminist discourse, which advocates for women's autonomy and self-expression.

Shenoy juxtaposes Diksha's newfound liberation with the constraints of her earlier life, creating a narrative of contrast and growth. As Diksha ticks off items on her wish list—such as learning salsa or pursuing a romantic relationship—she begins to rediscover her sense of self. *Every step I took felt like a rebellion,* she says, highlighting the courage required to break free from societal expectations. These moments serve as powerful reminders of the importance of taking risks to achieve fulfilment.

The theme of self-expression is further explored through the motif of dance. Diksha's decision to learn salsa represents more than a recreational activity—it is a reclaiming of her body and spirit. *For the first time in years, I felt graceful, alive, and in control,* she reflects. Dance becomes a metaphor for freedom, illustrating how creative pursuits can serve as vehicles for self-discovery. Shenoy's use of this motif adds depth to the narrative, linking personal transformation to the broader theme of liberation.

The concept of courage as a theme is intricately woven throughout Diksha's journey, emphasizing the bravery required to challenge societal norms. Shenoy poignantly illustrates this in moments where Diksha decides to prioritize her own happiness, despite the potential for backlash. *"The hardest battles are the ones we fight within ourselves,"* Diksha muses, acknowledging the internal struggle that accompanies her transformation. This internal conflict resonates with readers who grapple with self-doubt when making life-altering decisions. Shenoy's narrative encourages readers to confront their fears and pursue authenticity.

Diksha's relationship with her past plays a pivotal role in her rediscovery. Reuniting with Ankit, her first love, allows her to confront unresolved emotions and the choices that altered her life trajectory. Shenoy writes, *"Seeing Ankit after all these years felt like opening a door I had locked and forgotten about."* This reunion is not merely romantic but symbolic of Diksha reclaiming a part of herself that was lost to societal pressures. Through this interaction, Shenoy explores the theme of reconciliation—both with others and oneself—as a crucial step toward healing.

The exploration of unspoken societal rules adds a layer of depth to the novel, critiquing the implicit expectations placed on women. Diksha's story reveals how these unwritten norms dictate behaviour, leaving little room for individuality. *"It wasn't that anyone told me what to do,"* Diksha reflects, *"but it was as if the whole world conspired to make me believe this was my role."* This critique of systemic conditioning aligns with feminist theory, which seeks to dismantle the invisible structures that perpetuate inequality.

Hope and renewal emerge as overarching themes in *The Secret Wishlist*, providing a counterpoint to the challenges Diksha faces. Shenoy emphasizes the transformative power of hope through Diksha's decision to begin anew. *"It's never too late to start over,"* she tells herself, encapsulating the essence of the novel. This message is particularly resonant in a society where women are often told that their opportunities diminish with age. Diksha's journey serves as a testament to the possibilities that await those who dare to dream.

Another critical theme is the importance of self-care and nurturing one's mental and emotional well-being. As Diksha begins to prioritize her desires, she realizes the toll that years of neglect have taken on her psyche. Shenoy writes, *"I had spent so much time worrying about others that I had forgotten how to be kind to myself."* This realization marks a turning point, highlighting the necessity of self-compassion as a foundation for growth. The novel underscores the idea that caring for oneself is not selfish but essential.

Finally, Shenoy leaves readers with a sense of empowerment, urging them to reflect on their own lives. Diksha's final reflection, *"I don't know what the future holds, but for the first time, I am excited to find out,"* encapsulates the spirit of the novel. Her journey inspires readers to embrace change, challenge conventions, and prioritize their happiness. Through this empowering narrative, Shenoy delivers a profound message of hope, resilience, and self-discovery.

Character Study of Diksha

Diksha is introduced as a vibrant teenager full of dreams and aspirations, embodying the energy and hope of youth. In her early years, she is portrayed as a girl with a zest for life, enjoying friendships and cherishing romantic ideals. Shenoy captures this phase with warmth: *"Life felt like a carnival back then—every day was colourful and full of surprises."* This characterization sets the stage for the stark contrast between Diksha's carefree youth and the monotonous reality she later inhabits. Her vibrant personality is gradually subdued by societal expectations, illustrating the transformative impact of external pressures on individual identity.

As a teenager, Diksha's relationship with Ankit becomes a significant turning point in her life. Their innocent love is abruptly cut short when her family discovers their relationship, resulting in severe consequences. Diksha reflects, *"What happened wasn't just the end of my love story; it was the end of the girl I used to be."* This event marks the beginning of her submission to societal norms, as she is coerced into abandoning her individuality to fit traditional roles. Shenoy uses this turning point to critique the rigid moral codes imposed on young women, highlighting the emotional toll of such restrictions.

Diksha's transition into adulthood is marked by conformity and a loss of autonomy. Her arranged marriage to Sandeep exemplifies this shift, as she moves from her parents' control to her husband's. Shenoy writes, *"It wasn't that I hated my life, but I had stopped recognizing the person I had become."* This sentiment captures the dissonance between Diksha's true self and the role she is forced to play. Her narrative reflects the experiences of countless women who sacrifice their identities to meet societal expectations, making her journey deeply relatable.

As the narrative progresses, Shenoy delves into Diksha's internal struggles, revealing the psychological impact of years of suppression. Diksha's marriage is devoid of emotional connection, leaving her feeling isolated and unfulfilled. *"We shared a house, a son, and a life, but there was no 'us' in our relationship,"* she observes, underscoring the absence of intimacy. This portrayal sheds light on the emotional void that many women experience in traditional marriages, where their roles are often reduced to caregiving and domestic duties.

Diksha's internal conflict intensifies as she begins to question the choices that led to her current life. Her realization that she has neglected her own needs and desires becomes a turning point in her character arc. *"Somewhere along the way, I had forgotten that I was a person too, not just a wife and a mother,"* she reflects. This moment of self-awareness is

crucial, as it sets the stage for her transformation. Shenoy uses Diksha's introspection to highlight the importance of self-reflection in initiating change.

Shenoy also explores Diksha's relationship with her son, Abhay, as a source of both strength and motivation. While Diksha initially struggles to reconcile her desire for change with her responsibilities as a mother, her love for Abhay ultimately empowers her to act. She declares, *"I wanted to show my son that it's okay to dream, to make mistakes, and to start over."* This dynamic adds depth to Diksha's character, illustrating how her maternal instincts coexist with her need for self-fulfilment.

The turning point in Diksha's journey is her decision to create a wish list, which serves as both a literal and symbolic act of reclaiming her identity. Writing the list allows her to articulate her desires for the first time in years. *"Each item on the list felt like a piece of the person I used to be, waiting to be rediscovered,"* she remarks. This act signifies the beginning of her transformation, as she starts to prioritize her happiness and confront the societal norms that have constrained her.

Diksha's reconnection with Ankit represents another critical moment in her character arc. Their reunion forces her to confront unresolved emotions and question the decisions that shaped her life. Shenoy describes this meeting as a moment of clarity for Diksha: *"It wasn't just about Ankit—it was about the girl I had been and the woman I wanted to become."* This interaction serves as a catalyst for Diksha's transformation, pushing her to embrace her desires and pursue her true self.

Diksha's journey of self-discovery is marked by incremental steps, each of which contributes to her growing sense of empowerment. Learning salsa, pursuing a romantic relationship, and reconnecting with old friends are all milestones in her transformation. Shenoy writes, *"Every step I took felt like peeling back layers of who I had become to reveal the person I was meant to be."* This portrayal emphasizes the importance of small, deliberate actions in achieving personal growth, making Diksha's journey both relatable and inspiring.

Shenoy's nuanced portrayal of Diksha's transformation highlights the complexity of her journey. While Diksha experiences moments of exhilaration and liberation, she also faces significant challenges and self-doubt. *"Change is never easy,"* she acknowledges, *"but staying the same felt like a slow death."* This duality adds realism to the narrative, illustrating the emotional and psychological hurdles that accompany personal growth. Diksha's resilience in the face of these challenges is a testament to her inner strength and determination.

The support of Diksha's friends, particularly Vibha, plays a crucial role in her transformation. Vibha's encouragement and understanding provide Diksha with the confidence to pursue her dreams. *"Having someone who believed in me made all the difference,"* Diksha reflects. This dynamic underscores the importance of supportive relationships in fostering personal growth, positioning friendship as a counterbalance to the alienation Diksha experiences in her marriage.

By the end of the novel, Diksha emerges as a transformed individual, having reclaimed her sense of self and embraced her desires. Shenoy writes, *"For the first time in years, I felt*

whole—like I was living, not just existing.” This culmination of Diksha’s journey is both poignant and empowering, offering readers a sense of hope and inspiration. Her story serves as a reminder that it is never too late to pursue happiness and live authentically.

Diksha’s character embodies the universal struggle for self-actualization, making her journey deeply relatable. Shenoy’s portrayal is rooted in authenticity, capturing the complexities of human emotion and the challenges of breaking free from societal constraints. *“We are all prisoners of our own making,”* Diksha observes, highlighting the role of internalized norms in perpetuating cycles of conformity. This insight adds depth to her character, emphasizing the interplay between personal agency and societal influences.

The resolution of Diksha’s journey is not presented as a final destination but as an ongoing process of growth and self-discovery. Shenoy leaves readers with a sense of optimism, as Diksha declares, *“I don’t have all the answers, but I finally have the courage to ask the questions.”* This open-ended conclusion reflects the realities of personal transformation, which is rarely linear or complete. Diksha’s willingness to embrace uncertainty is a testament to her growth and resilience.

Through Diksha’s character, Shenoy challenges readers to reflect on their own lives and consider the changes they might make to pursue fulfilment. *“Life is too short to live for others,”* Diksha’s journey suggests, encapsulating the novel’s central message. Her story is a powerful reminder of the importance of self-expression, resilience, and the courage to embrace change, making her character one of Shenoy’s most compelling creations.

Psychoanalytic theory provides a profound lens for analysing Diksha’s journey in *The Secret Wishlist*, particularly her internal conflicts and suppressed desires. Sigmund Freud’s concept of the unconscious is central to understanding Diksha’s character. For years, her unfulfilled desires remain buried, manifesting as a vague sense of discontent. She reflects, *“I couldn’t pinpoint what was wrong, but I knew something inside me had died.”* This statement reflects the repression of her desires, which Freud argues can lead to psychological distress if unresolved.

Freud’s theory of repression is evident in Diksha’s life as she suppresses her individuality to conform to societal expectations. Her teenage self, full of ambition and romantic ideals, is forced into submission after her relationship with Ankit is discovered. Shenoy writes, *“It was easier to comply than to fight, but in doing so, I lost myself.”* This act of compliance symbolizes the suppression of her true self, leading to the creation of an alternate persona shaped by societal norms. This duality aligns with Freud’s notion of the ego negotiating between the id (her desires) and the superego (societal expectations).

The act of writing a wish list marks the resurfacing of Diksha’s repressed desires, which can be understood through Carl Jung’s concept of individuation—the process of integrating suppressed aspects of the self. Diksha remarks, *“It felt strange to put my thoughts into words, as though I was meeting a stranger who had lived inside me all along.”* This moment signifies the beginning of her psychological transformation, as she confronts and integrates the parts of herself that she had long ignored.

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework further enriches the interpretation of Diksha's journey, particularly through his concept of the "mirror stage." Lacan theorizes that identity is constructed through a constant negotiation between the self and the other. Diksha's life, for much of the novel, is defined by how others perceive her. Shenoy writes, *"I had become what everyone wanted me to be—a good wife, a good mother, a good daughter-in-law—but I had no idea who I really was."* This statement highlights the dissonance between Diksha's external persona and her internal identity.

The wish list serves as a symbolic mirror through which Diksha begins to recognize her true self. Each item on the list represents a fragment of her identity that she had previously neglected. As she starts to fulfil these desires, Diksha moves closer to achieving what Lacan describes as the "real," a state of authenticity and wholeness. *"Every step I took felt like I was reclaiming a piece of my soul,"* she observes, capturing the essence of her journey toward self-realization.

The concept of desire, a central tenet of Lacanian psychoanalysis, is intricately woven into Diksha's narrative. Lacan posits that desire is shaped by a lack or absence, which compels individuals to seek fulfilment. Diksha's dissatisfaction with her life stems from the suppression of her desires, leaving a void that she struggles to articulate. Shenoy writes, *"I didn't know what I wanted, but I knew this wasn't it."* This lack becomes the driving force behind her transformation, as she begins to articulate and pursue her true desires.

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory provides another valuable perspective, particularly his stages of identity and role confusion. Diksha's story aligns with Erikson's notion that unresolved conflicts in earlier stages of development can resurface later in life. As a teenager, Diksha is forced to abandon her budding sense of identity when her relationship with Ankit is discovered. Shenoy writes, *"That was the moment I stopped being me and started being who everyone wanted me to be."* This premature foreclosure of her identity creates a crisis that remains unresolved until she begins her journey of self-discovery.

The middle stages of Erikson's theory emphasize generativity versus stagnation, a conflict that defines much of Diksha's adult life. For years, she fulfils her roles as a wife and mother but feels stagnant and unfulfilled. *"I was living, but I wasn't alive,"* she reflects. This sense of stagnation prompts her to take action, as she realizes that generativity—creating a life of meaning and purpose—requires reclaiming her individuality. Diksha's decision to pursue her wish list represents her transition from stagnation to generativity, aligning with Erikson's framework.

From a psychosocial perspective, Diksha's relationships also play a pivotal role in her transformation. Erikson emphasizes the importance of intimacy and connection in fostering personal growth. While her marriage to Sandeep lacks emotional intimacy, her friendship with Vibha and reconnection with Ankit provide the support and encouragement she needs. Vibha's advice, *"You deserve to be happy, and only you can make that happen,"* reflects the role of meaningful relationships in helping Diksha overcome her crisis and embrace change.

Melanie Klein's object relations theory offers insights into Diksha's relationship dynamics, particularly her role as a mother. Klein emphasizes the importance of early relationships in shaping identity and emotional well-being. Diksha's maternal instincts are evident throughout the novel, as she prioritizes her son, Abhay, even while grappling with her own struggles. She reflects, *"Everything I did was for Abhay, but somewhere along the way, I realized I needed to do something for myself too."* This dual commitment to her son and herself underscores the complexities of balancing self-care with caregiving.

Klein's concept of splitting—the tendency to perceive relationships as either wholly good or wholly bad—is also relevant to Diksha's narrative. For much of the novel, Diksha views her marriage as entirely unfulfilling and her past with Ankit as an idealized time. However, as she matures, she begins to integrate these perspectives, recognizing that her life is a blend of positive and negative experiences. *"My past wasn't perfect, but it was mine, and it shaped who I am today,"* she reflects. This integration reflects a healthier, more nuanced understanding of her relationships and experiences.

Diksha's journey can also be analysed through Donald Winnicott's concept of the "true self" versus the "false self." For years, Diksha operates from a false self, adhering to societal expectations at the expense of her authenticity. Shenoy writes, *"I had perfected the art of pretending everything was fine."* The creation of the wish list marks a shift toward her true self, as she begins to express her genuine desires and emotions. This transition underscores the importance of authenticity in achieving psychological well-being.

The resolution of Diksha's journey can be interpreted through Viktor Frankl's existential psychology, particularly his emphasis on finding meaning in life. Frankl posits that individuals can endure significant suffering if they perceive it as meaningful. Diksha's struggles, though painful, ultimately lead her to a deeper understanding of herself and her purpose. She reflects, *"Every challenge I faced taught me something about myself. I wouldn't change a thing."* This perspective aligns with Frankl's belief in the transformative power of purpose and resilience.

Frankl's concept of self-transcendence is also evident in Diksha's journey. As she begins to prioritize her desires, she discovers that her actions inspire those around her, particularly her son. *"By choosing to live authentically, I showed my son that it's okay to follow your heart,"* she observes. This realization reflects Frankl's idea that true fulfilment comes from contributing to something greater than oneself, adding depth to Diksha's transformation.

Finally, Diksha's story demonstrates the enduring relevance of psychoanalytic and existential theories in understanding contemporary narratives. Shenoy's portrayal of Diksha is a testament to the complexity of human emotion and the resilience of the human spirit. *"Life isn't about the choices we make; it's about having the courage to make them,"* Diksha declares, encapsulating the novel's central message. Her journey offers readers a profound reminder of the importance of authenticity, courage, and the pursuit of meaning.

Social Commentary

Preeti Shenoy's *The Secret Wishlist* critiques the traditional roles imposed on women, particularly in Indian society. Diksha's journey reflects the challenges faced by women who are expected to prioritize familial duties over personal aspirations. Shenoy captures this tension when Diksha remarks, *"It was as though the world had already decided my destiny, and I simply had to comply."* This statement underscores the societal conditioning that often limits women's autonomy, forcing them to conform to predefined roles.

The novel also examines the pervasive stigma surrounding female ambition and independence. Diksha's desire to pursue her wish list is met with resistance and judgment, reflecting societal discomfort with women asserting their individuality. Shenoy writes, *"A woman dreaming for herself was seen as selfish, but no one questioned the sacrifices she made every day."* This critique highlights the double standards that often govern women's lives, where their contributions are undervalued, and their desires dismissed.

Through Diksha's story, Shenoy also exposes the lack of emotional intimacy in many traditional marriages, where gender roles often perpetuate inequality. Diksha's husband, Sandeep, epitomizes the patriarchal mindset, treating her as a caregiver rather than an equal partner. Diksha observes, *"We shared a house but not a life; he saw me as an extension of his needs, never as a person with my own."* This portrayal serves as a critique of marriages where women's emotional needs are overlooked, reducing their identities to their roles as wives and mothers.

The novel critiques the social conditioning that discourages women from voicing their desires or pursuing their passions. Diksha's internalized guilt about prioritizing herself reflects this conditioning. Shenoy writes, *"Every time I thought of doing something for myself, a voice inside me asked if I was being selfish."* This internal struggle illustrates how deeply ingrained societal norms can hinder women from seeking fulfilment, even when it is within their reach.

Shenoy also critiques the glorification of sacrifice in Indian culture, where women are often celebrated for enduring hardships rather than pursuing happiness. Diksha reflects on this when she says, *"Why was it that a woman's worth was measured by how much she could endure and not by how happy she was?"* This sentiment challenges the traditional narrative that equates suffering with virtue, urging readers to rethink the metrics by which women's lives are judged.

Additionally, the novel addresses the societal obsession with appearances, particularly in the context of marriage. Diksha's transformation, both physical and emotional, prompts her to question the superficial standards by which women are evaluated. *"It wasn't just about losing weight; it was about shedding the layers of judgment I had carried for years,"* she notes. This critique extends to the broader cultural emphasis on physical beauty as a determinant of a woman's value, reinforcing the novel's call for a more holistic appreciation of women's identities.

The theme of generational expectations is another critical aspect of Shenoy's social commentary. Diksha's experiences highlight the intergenerational cycle of conformity, where mothers pass down societal norms to their daughters, often unwittingly. Diksha reflects, *"My mother taught me to blend in, to never stand out, and I had done exactly that. But was I teaching my son the same thing?"* This observation underscores the importance of breaking these cycles to foster individuality and self-expression in future generations.

Shenoy also critiques the societal tendency to suppress conversations about women's mental health. Diksha's growing dissatisfaction with her life is dismissed by those around her, reflecting a broader cultural reluctance to address emotional well-being. *"They told me I should be grateful, but no one asked if I was happy,"* Diksha laments. This critique underscores the need for greater awareness and dialogue about mental health, particularly for women who are often expected to suppress their struggles.

Through the lens of Diksha's friendship with Vibha, Shenoy explores the role of female solidarity in challenging societal norms. Vibha's support empowers Diksha to pursue her dreams, illustrating the transformative power of shared experiences and mutual encouragement. *"Vibha didn't just listen; she understood, and that made all the difference,"* Diksha observes. This dynamic serves as a reminder of the importance of fostering supportive relationships among women to counteract societal pressures.

The novel critiques the rigid moral codes that govern women's behaviour, particularly regarding relationships and sexuality. Diksha's teenage romance with Ankit is condemned not for any wrongdoing but simply because it defies societal norms. She recalls, *"The shame wasn't in what I had done but in the fact that I had dared to love."* This critique highlights the disproportionate scrutiny women face for choices that deviate from societal expectations, reinforcing the novel's call for greater acceptance of individual freedom.

Shenoy also addresses the economic dependency that often traps women in unfulfilling relationships. Diksha's financial reliance on Sandeep limits her ability to assert herself, reflecting the broader issue of economic inequality in traditional marriages. *"I had no money of my own, no way to leave even if I wanted to,"* she confesses. This critique underscores the importance of financial independence as a means of empowering women to make choices that align with their happiness and well-being.

The novel further critiques the culture of silence surrounding women's dissatisfaction in marriage. Diksha's unhappiness is ignored by those around her, who dismiss her feelings as trivial. Shenoy writes, *"Everyone told me that this was just how life was, but I refused to believe that happiness was too much to ask for."* This refusal to accept mediocrity becomes a powerful act of resistance, challenging societal norms that normalize women's unhappiness.

In its broader social critique, *The Secret Wishlist* highlights the importance of challenging patriarchal structures that limit women's potential. Diksha's decision to pursue her wish list symbolizes a rejection of these structures, as she declares, *"I wasn't rebelling against anyone;*

I was simply reclaiming my life.” This act of reclamation reflects Shenoy’s message that true empowerment comes from within, urging women to take ownership of their lives despite societal resistance.

Shenoy also critiques the societal narrative that equates motherhood with self-sacrifice, suggesting that this narrative often overlooks the individuality of mothers. Diksha’s realization that her happiness is essential not just for herself but for her son challenges this narrative. *“By being true to myself, I was teaching Abhay to do the same,”* she reflects. This statement reinforces the novel’s call for a more balanced understanding of motherhood, where self-fulfilment and caregiving coexist.

Finally, the novel critiques the lack of spaces for women to express their desires and aspirations. Diksha’s journey is a testament to the transformative power of self-expression, as she discovers her true self through her wish list. Shenoy writes, *“For years, I had been silent, but now I had found my voice, and I wasn’t afraid to use it.”* This powerful conclusion underscores the importance of creating environments where women can articulate their dreams and pursue their passions without fear of judgment.

Conclusion

Preeti Shenoy’s *The Secret Wishlist* is a profound exploration of identity, desire, and transformation, offering a multifaceted critique of societal norms while celebrating the resilience of the human spirit. Through the character of Diksha, Shenoy vividly portrays the struggles of women constrained by patriarchal structures, the burden of conformity, and the silencing of individuality. Diksha’s journey—from a life of quiet discontent to one of fulfilment and self-expression—offers readers an inspiring roadmap for reclaiming autonomy and authenticity.

The novel’s psychoanalytic dimensions deepen its impact, as Diksha’s internal conflicts and repressed desires resonate with Freud’s and Jung’s theories of the unconscious and individuation. Diksha’s transformation, driven by her wish list, symbolizes the integration of her fragmented self and her pursuit of wholeness. As she confronts her past and redefines her future, Diksha exemplifies the psychological resilience required to overcome societal and personal barriers.

From a social commentary perspective, *The Secret Wishlist* challenges entrenched norms surrounding gender roles, marriage, and motherhood. Shenoy critiques the glorification of sacrifice and conformity, advocating for a more equitable and inclusive understanding of women’s lives. Diksha’s story underscores the importance of financial independence, emotional intimacy, and supportive relationships in fostering personal growth and empowerment. By addressing themes of love, ambition, and mental health, the novel provides a nuanced reflection on the complexities of modern womanhood.

Ultimately, *The Secret Wishlist* is both a critique and a celebration: it critiques the societal norms that restrict women while celebrating the courage it takes to break free. Diksha’s realization that *“It’s never too late to follow your dreams”* serves as a powerful reminder that transformation is always possible, no matter how long one has lived in silence. Shenoy’s

narrative invites readers to question societal expectations and embrace the possibilities of self-discovery, making the novel a timeless and inspiring tale for all.

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