

UNVEILING THE FEMALE PSYCHE: PSYCHOLOGICAL REALISM AND FEMINIST NARRATIVES IN PREETI SHENOY'S THE ONE YOU CANNOT HAVE

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Abstract:

Preeti Shenoy's *The One You Cannot Have* (2013) intricately portrays the psychological landscapes of its female protagonists, Shruti and Anjali, as they navigate love, heartbreak, and societal expectations in contemporary urban India. This paper examines the delineation of the female psyche through psychological realism, focusing on themes of emotional resilience, identity conflict, and resistance to patriarchal structures. By analyzing the characters' internal struggles and responses to romantic and social pressures, the study hypothesizes that Shenoy presents women as agents of self-discovery who challenge traditional gender roles while confronting the constraints of modern relationships. Using qualitative textual analysis grounded in feminist literary theory, this paper explores how Shenoy's narrative strategies illuminate the psychological depth of her female characters, contributing to contemporary discourses on women's identities in Indian literature.

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Introduction:

Preeti Shenoy, a prominent voice in contemporary Indian fiction, is celebrated for her empathetic portrayals of emotional and psychological complexities, particularly through female perspectives. Her novel *The One You Cannot Have* centers on Shruti, a married woman haunted by a past love, and Anjali, an independent journalist grappling with unrequited affection. Set in urban India, the novel explores how these women negotiate personal desires within societal expectations, offering a nuanced depiction of the female psyche. This paper analyzes Shenoy's portrayal of women's psychological experiences, hypothesizing that she presents female characters as resilient agents who assert agency through self-discovery, despite patriarchal norms and romantic entanglements. The study is guided by numbered objectives and hypotheses, employing a qualitative approach to examine the novel's contribution to feminist narratives in Indian literature.

Objectives:

1. To examine the psychological conflicts faced by Shruti and Anjali in navigating love and heartbreak.
2. To analyze the influence of societal and patriarchal pressures on the formation of their identities.
3. To evaluate Shenoy's use of psychological realism in depicting the emotional evolution of her female characters.
4. To assess the novel's contribution to feminist narratives within contemporary Indian literature.

Hypotheses:

1. Shenoy portrays the female psyche as a dynamic interplay of emotional resilience and identity conflict, enabling women to challenge patriarchal norms.
2. Shruti and Anjali assert agency through self-discovery, despite constraints imposed by romantic relationships and societal expectations.
3. Shenoy's use of psychological realism effectively highlights the emotional growth of her female

characters, contributing to feminist discourses on women's autonomy.

Literature Review:

Contemporary Indian literature in English increasingly prioritizes women's psychological experiences, moving beyond traditional archetypes to address agency, identity, and resistance. Nurdien H. Kistanto argues that Indian women writers like Shenoy use psychological realism to depict "the agony of existence in a hostile and male-dominated society" (thyl 15). Shenoy's novels, including *The One You Cannot Have* and *The Secret Wish List*, are noted for their relatable characters and authentic emotional portrayals. Sharan Balaji emphasizes that Shenoy's works reflect "the journey and strife of women in a patriarchal society," highlighting their resilience (Balaji 23). Feminist literary theory, as articulated by Jane Spencer, provides a framework for understanding how women's narratives challenge gendered ideologies (Spencer 45). Meena Kandasamy's work on Indian women's fiction further underscores the intersection of personal and societal conflicts in shaping female identity (Kandasamy 67). This paper builds on these insights to situate Shenoy's novel within Indian feminist literature.

Methodology:

This research employs a qualitative textual analysis of *The One You Cannot Have*, focusing on the characterization of Shruti and Anjali. Informed by feminist literary theory, the analysis interprets the psychological and social dimensions of their experiences. Key passages are examined for thematic patterns, such as emotional vulnerability, self-reflection, and resistance to gender norms. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and theoretical texts, contextualize Shenoy's portrayal within contemporary Indian literature.

Shruti: The Weight of Unresolved Love and Social Duty: Shruti, one of the central female protagonists in

The One You Cannot Have, epitomizes the psychological tension between personal desire and societal obligation, a conflict that underscores her complex emotional landscape. Married to Rishabh, a stable and socially acceptable partner, Shruti is haunted by her past romantic relationship with Aman, which continues to shape her emotional and psychological identity. This unresolved love serves as a lens through which Shenoy explores the female psyche, highlighting the enduring impact of memory and desire on a woman's sense of self within a patriarchal framework. Shenoy employs psychological realism to vividly capture Shruti's inner turmoil, as seen in the following passage:

It is funny what memories can do to you. How they can grip you by the throat, choke you, strangle you. And just when you thought you had it all sorted, too. It can make you long for a person long after they are gone. It can leave you with a feeling so incomplete that you wonder if you will ever be whole again (Shenoy 45). This excerpt underscores the visceral intensity of Shruti's emotional vulnerability. The metaphors of physical violence "grip you by the throat, choke you, strangle you" convey the overwhelming power of memory to disrupt her present life, illustrating the psychological realism that Shenoy uses to depict the female psyche as a site of ongoing conflict. This aligns with Nurdien H. Kistanto's observation that Shenoy's characters endure "the agony of existence in male-dominated societies, yet their resilience enables navigation of these challenges" (Kistanto 15). Shruti's memories of Aman are not merely nostalgic but represent a psychological battle between her authentic desires and the societal expectation to conform as a dutiful wife.

Shruti's decision to remain in her marriage to Rishabh, despite her emotional attachment to Aman, reflects the prioritization of social stability over personal fulfillment, a choice shaped by patriarchal norms that

demand women suppress their desires for the sake of family and social harmony. This decision, however, comes at a significant psychological cost. Shenoy illustrates this in another poignant moment:

I try to push Aman out of my mind, but he creeps in like an uninvited guest, settling into the corners of my heart, refusing to leave. I am married now, I tell myself. I have a life, a husband, a home. But the heart doesn't listen to reason (Shenoy 89).

Here, the personification of Aman as an “uninvited guest” highlights the involuntary nature of Shruti's emotional struggle, emphasizing the conflict between her rational commitment to her marriage and the irrational pull of her past love. This internal dichotomy supports Hypothesis 1, which posits that Shenoy portrays the female psyche as a dynamic interplay of emotional resilience and identity conflict. Shruti's resilience is evident in her attempt to “push Aman out,” yet her inability to fully do so reveals the depth of her psychological turmoil, a hallmark of Shenoy's realistic portrayal of women navigating love and heartbreak.

From a feminist perspective, Shruti's struggle can be read as a critique of patriarchal structures that limit women's emotional autonomy. Jane Spencer's feminist literary theory, “which emphasizes how women's narratives challenge gendered ideologies” (Spencer 45), is particularly relevant here. Shruti's marriage represents a socially sanctioned role, but her lingering attachment to Aman signifies a rebellion against the expectation that women's identities should be wholly defined by their marital status. Her psychological conflict thus becomes a site of resistance, as she grapples with the tension between societal duty and personal desire. This resistance, though internalized, aligns with Hypothesis 2, which suggests that Shruti asserts agency through self-discovery, even within the constraints of her marriage.

Furthermore, Shruti's interactions with Rishabh reveal how patriarchal expectations shape interpersonal

dynamics. Rishabh's discomfort with Shruti's past love for Aman reflects a societal assumption about women's emotional “purity,” reinforcing gendered double standards. Shenoy captures this tension in a moment of strained communication:

Rishabh looks at me sometimes, and I wonder if he knows. I wonder if he sees Aman in my eyes. But he never asks, and I never tell. It's like we're both pretending everything is fine, but the silence is heavy (Shenoy 112).

The “heavy” silence symbolizes the unspoken patriarchal constraints that govern their marriage, where Shruti's emotional truth is suppressed to maintain harmony. This dynamic underscores the psychological realism of Shenoy's narrative, as it portrays the subtle yet pervasive ways in which societal expectations infiltrate personal relationships, shaping women's emotional experiences.

Shruti's psychological conflict rooted in the tension between her unresolved love for Aman and her social duty as a wife illustrates Shenoy's nuanced portrayal of the female psyche. Through psychological realism, Shenoy captures Shruti's emotional vulnerability and resilience, positioning her as a woman who navigates patriarchal constraints while seeking self-discovery. This analysis supports the paper's objectives of examining psychological conflicts and evaluating Shenoy's use of psychological realism, contributing to the broader feminist narrative of women challenging traditional gender roles.

Anjali: The Quest for Autonomy Amid Emotional Vulnerability:

Anjali, the novel's other female protagonist, is a modern, independent journalist whose journey in *The One You Cannot Have* centers on her quest for autonomy in a society that often ties women's identities to relationships. Her unrequited love for Aman exposes her emotional vulnerability, creating a psychological conflict between her professional independence and her

personal desires. Shenoy uses Anjali's character to explore how women negotiate emotional fragility within a patriarchal framework, offering a realistic portrayal of the female psyche that aligns with feminist literary discourses on agency and identity. Anjali's emotional struggle is poignantly captured in the following passage:

The harder one tries to get over that person, the deeper they seem to fall for them. This love, it is a funny thing. It can elevate you to the highest peak and plunge you to a bottomless pit. I want to tell her that love can also hurt and wound. It can make you ache. (Shenoy 78).

The above quotation encapsulates Anjali's internal conflict, as her unrequited love for Aman undermines her efforts to maintain emotional control. The metaphor of love as a force that can both "elevate" and "plunge" reflects the dual nature of her psychological experience, oscillating between empowerment and despair. Shenoy's use of psychological realism here lies in her ability to convey the complexity of Anjali's emotions, portraying love not as a romantic ideal but as a source of profound psychological pain. This supports Hypothesis 3, which argues that Shenoy's psychological realism highlights the emotional growth of her female characters.

Anjali's professional identity as a journalist adds another layer to her psychological landscape. Her columns on empowerment and independence reflect her conscious resistance to patriarchal norms that prioritize marriage and domesticity for women. Shenoy illustrates this in a moment of self-reflection:

I write about women who break free, who chase their dreams, who refuse to be defined by men. But here I am, aching for a man who doesn't even see me. How do I reconcile the woman I am in my words with the woman I am in my heart? (Shenoy 134).

This quotation reveals the tension between Anjali's public persona as a feminist advocate and her private emotional vulnerability, highlighting the identity

conflict central to Hypothesis 1. The rhetorical question underscores her struggle to integrate her empowered self with her emotional dependence on Aman, a conflict that resonates with Meena Kandasamy's observation is as: "Indian women's fiction explores the intersection of personal and societal conflicts in shaping female identity" (Kandasamy 67). Anjali's self-awareness marks the beginning of her journey toward self-discovery, supporting Hypothesis 2, which posits that she asserts agency despite romantic constraints.

From a feminist perspective, Anjali's narrative challenges the notion that women's identities are inherently tied to romantic fulfillment. Jane Spencer's framework, which emphasizes how women's narratives interrogate gendered ideologies (Spencer 45), is relevant here. Anjali's columns serve as a platform for questioning societal expectations, as seen in her critique of gendered communication:

Men are always complaining about how difficult it is to understand women but I think it is the other way round. Men clam up and do not express what they feel. Then they suddenly stop all communication with you and vanish. All you can do is wait. I wish men came with an instruction manual (Shenoy 102).

The "instruction manual" metaphor humorously critiques the gendered barriers to emotional intimacy, positioning Anjali as an active commentator on patriarchal dynamics. Her frustration with men's emotional unavailability reflects her broader resistance to societal norms that place the burden of relational maintenance on women. This aligns with Sharan Balaji's observation "Shenoy's protagonists embody resilience, challenging stereotypes of women as passive" (Balaji 23).

Anjali's journey toward autonomy is further complicated by societal pressures to prioritize marriage over her career. Friends and family subtly urge her to "settle down," reinforcing the patriarchal expectation that a woman's worth is tied to her relational status.

Shenoy captures this tension in a conversation where Anjali deflects such pressure:

‘You’re not getting any younger, Anjali. Don’t you want to settle down?’ My aunt’s voice is gentle, but it stings. I want to tell her I’m settled in my own way—my work, my words, my world. But I just smile and change the subject (Shenoy 145).

This moment highlights Anjali’s quiet defiance, as her choice to prioritize her career over marriage reflects her agency. Her internal assertion of being “settled in my own way” underscores her evolving sense of self, marking a significant step in her emotional growth. This supports Hypothesis 3, as Shenoy’s psychological realism portrays Anjali’s resilience in navigating societal expectations while confronting her emotional vulnerabilities.

In this novel Anjali’s quest for autonomy amid emotional vulnerability illustrates Shenoy’s nuanced depiction of the female psyche. Through psychological realism, Shenoy captures Anjali’s struggle to reconcile her professional independence with her unrequited love, positioning her as a resilient agent who challenges patriarchal norms. Her journey of self-discovery, marked by her feminist writings and resistance to societal pressures, contributes to the novel’s feminist narrative, aligning with the paper’s objectives of analyzing societal influences on identity and assessing Shenoy’s contribution to Indian feminist literature.

Integration with Paper’s Framework:

The novels women protagonists Shruti and Anjali deepens the paper’s exploration of psychological realism and feminist narratives by providing richer textual evidence and theoretical connections. Both characters’ psychological conflicts Shruti’s tension between duty and desire, and Anjali’s struggle for autonomy amid emotional fragility support the hypotheses that Shenoy portrays the female psyche as a dynamic interplay of resilience and identity conflict (Hypothesis 1), asserts agency through self-discovery

(Hypothesis 2), and uses psychological realism to highlight emotional growth (Hypothesis 3). The feminist literary framework, drawing on Spencer and Kandasamy, underscores how their narratives challenge patriarchal norms, contributing to contemporary discourses on women’s identities in Indian literature, as outlined in the paper’s objectives.

Patriarchal Constraints and Societal Expectations:

Shruti and Anjali navigate a patriarchal society imposing rigid expectations. Rishabh’s discomfort with Shruti’s past reflects assumptions about women’s emotional purity, as seen here:

Men are always complaining about how difficult it is to understand women but I think it is the other way round. Men clam up and do not express what they feel. Then they suddenly stop all communication with you and vanish. All you can do is wait. I wish men came with an instruction manual. (Shenoy 102)

The “instruction manual” metaphor highlights gendered communication barriers, reinforcing Hypothesis 1. Anjali faces pressure to prioritize marriage over her career, but her resistance aligns with Kandasamy’s view of Indian women’s fiction exploring personal-societal conflicts (Kandasamy 67).

Psychological Realism and Emotional Growth:

Shenoy’s psychological realism delves into the characters’ inner lives, emphasizing resilience. The novel’s theme of emotional growth is captured here:

Life never ceases to throw us googlies. It is how we handle them that makes all the difference. Sometimes you have to take control of it and, at other times, it is best to let go. And the wisest of persons is the one who knows which option to choose.

(Shenoy 156)

This reflects Shruti and Anjali’s evolution, supporting Hypothesis 3. Balaji notes “Shenoy’s protagonists embody resilience, challenging stereotypes of women as passive” (Balaji 23).

Intersectionality and Broader Context:

The novel engages with gender, class, and urban modernity. Shruti and Anjali, as educated urban women, face unique challenges where economic independence coexists with gender norms. Kandasamy's work highlights these intersectional dynamics, enriching Shenoy's portrayal (Kandasamy 67).

Comparative Perspectives:

Compared to Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*, Shenoy's novel focuses on two intertwined stories, allowing deeper psychological exploration. Both emphasize self-discovery, reinforcing feminist themes, but Shenoy's accessible storytelling broadens her impact.

Conclusion:

Preeti Shenoy's *The One You Cannot Have* offers a profound exploration of the female psyche, portraying Shruti and Anjali as resilient agents navigating emotional turmoil and patriarchal constraints. Psychological realism highlights their emotional growth, confirming Hypotheses 1–3. The novel contributes to Indian feminist literature by redefining women's narratives. Future research could compare Shenoy's works with global feminist texts to further elucidate her impact.

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