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Domestic Space and the Development of Female Subjectivity in Preeti Shenoy's *The Secret Wish List* and *The Rule Breakers*

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Abstract—Contemporary Indian English fiction increasingly examines women's identities within changing familial, marital, and social environments. The domestic sphere in such narratives is not merely a private setting but a significant space in which identity, emotional experience, and individual choice are negotiated. This paper examines the representation of domestic space and female subjectivity in Preeti Shenoy's The Secret Wish List (2012) and The Rule Breakers (2018). Rather than approaching the protagonists only through the framework of feminist resistance, the study focuses on the processes through which their identities develop in response to emotional dissatisfaction, interpersonal relationships, marital expectations, and personal reflection. Diksha Dixit in The Secret Wish List gradually recognizes the difference between her socially assigned domestic responsibilities and her individual aspirations. Veda Thakur in The Rule Breakers encounters a more disruptive identity crisis when her understanding of marriage is challenged by the revelation concerning her husband's sexuality. The study adopts a qualitative close-reading method and draws upon feminist perspectives, particularly the concepts of existentialist feminism and gender performativity. The analysis demonstrates that Shenoy represents domestic space as neither exclusively oppressive nor entirely liberating. Instead, it functions as a negotiated environment in which women experience responsibility, attachment, conflict, emotional recognition, and self-reconstruction. The comparison of Diksha and Veda further demonstrates that female subjectivity develops through different forms of relational and emotional experience. The study therefore proposes that Shenoy's fiction presents female identity as an evolving process shaped by social relationships as well as individual reflection and choice.

Keywords—*Domestic* Space, Female Subjectivity, Emotional Negotiation, Identity

1. Introduction

Contemporary Indian English fiction has increasingly given literary attention to women's experiences within changing familial and social environments. Marriage, domestic responsibility, emotional expectations, social conventions, and personal aspirations frequently intersect in representations of contemporary womanhood. Within this context, the domestic sphere cannot be treated merely as a private background to women's lives. It can also become a significant literary space in which identities are formed, questioned, and reconstructed. Preeti Shenoy is a contemporary Indian writer whose fiction frequently explores relationships, emotional conflict, personal aspiration, and individual transformation. Her female protagonists are often situated within recognisable social and domestic environments in which personal desires interact with expectations associated with family and relationships. The representation of women in Shenoy's fiction has therefore attracted critical attention from scholars examining oppression, womanhood, gender relations, and self-discovery. Astuti and Kistanto examine The Secret Wish List through the concepts of male domination, women's oppression, existentialist feminism, and deconstruction. Their study demonstrates that the novel presents tensions surrounding male-dominated social structures and women's responses to them. Kashyap and Richa similarly examine the man-woman relationship in the novel, particularly Diksha's emotional awakening and her changing understanding of identity and relationships. Kumari's study considers the changing representation of

womanhood in Shenoy's fiction and identifies a movement away from conventional expectations of submissiveness and domesticity. Kundu, in her study of The Rule Breakers, examines gender and sexuality through a framework informed by Judith Butler and focuses on the social structures surrounding heterosexuality, homosexuality, and gender identity. While these studies provide useful perspectives on gender, oppression, womanhood, and sexuality, the present study shifts the emphasis towards domestic space and female subjectivity. It considers how women's identities develop through everyday relational experiences rather than treating identity transformation only as a direct rejection of patriarchy. The study focuses on two protagonists, Diksha Dixit in The Secret Wish List and Veda Thakur in The Rule Breakers, whose experiences of marriage and relationships produce different forms of self-recognition. The Secret Wish List, published by Westland in 2012 [5], follows Diksha, whose adult life is shaped by marriage, family responsibilities, emotional dissatisfaction, and suppressed aspirations. The Rule Breakers, published by Westland in 2018 [6], presents Veda Thakur in a marital situation disrupted by the discovery that her husband is gay. Although the circumstances differ considerably, both narratives place questions of identity within intimate relationships. The present study therefore addresses three central questions: How does domestic space influence the construction of female subjectivity in the two novels? How do emotional and relational experiences contribute to the protagonists' self-recognition? How do Diksha and Veda negotiate identities shaped by socially defined marital expectations?

2. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative textual approach based on close reading of Preeti Shenoy's The Secret Wish List and The Rule Breakers. The novels constitute the primary texts, while selected critical studies are used to establish the scholarly context. Attention is given to characterization, domestic relationships, emotional conflict, interpersonal communication, gender expectations, and moments of personal decision-making.

The study uses feminist literary perspectives as interpretive tools. Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of woman as socially constituted "Other" provides a conceptual basis for examining the relationship between socially assigned roles and individual identity. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is used in the analysis of The Rule Breakers, particularly in relation to the repetition of socially recognized gender and heterosexual expectations. These theories are not treated as rigid categories; instead, they provide conceptual frameworks for interpreting the literary representation of identity and social roles.

The study is limited to two novels and two protagonists. It does not attempt to generalize the experiences of Diksha and Veda to all Indian women. Rather, the protagonists are examined as literary constructions situated within particular domestic, emotional, and social circumstances.

3. Domestic Space and the Formation of Female Subjectivity

Domestic space occupies an important position in literary representations of women's lives. The home may signify belonging, security, intimacy, and responsibility, while simultaneously becoming a location in which gender expectations are reproduced. The significance of domestic space in Shenoy's fiction lies in this duality. The home is not represented only as a place of restriction; it is also the environment in which the protagonists become conscious of their emotional and individual needs.

Female subjectivity in this study refers to the manner in which a woman character understands her as an individual possessing feelings, desires, memories, aspirations, and choices. Such subjectivity does not develop independently of social relationships. Family, marriage, friendship, and cultural expectations participate in shaping the individual understands of self. Beauvoir's account of woman's social positioning is relevant to this context because it draws attention to the ways in which women may be defined through externally imposed identities [7]. Shenoy's protagonists initially inhabit identities associated with relationships and responsibilities. Their subsequent development does not necessarily involve abandoning relationships altogether. Instead, it involves questioning whether socially assigned identities adequately represent their own experiences. The domestic sphere consequently becomes a dynamic literary space. It is a site of responsibility and expectation,

but it is also where dissatisfaction becomes visible and self-awareness begins. This complexity distinguishes the protagonists' development from a simple movement from oppression to freedom.

3.1 Emotional Dissatisfaction and Self-Recognition In The Secret Wish List

The Secret Wish List centres on Diksha Dixit, whose adult identity is strongly associated with marriage and family responsibility. Her personal aspirations occupy a secondary position within the domestic arrangement in which she lives. The significance of Diksha's experience lies not only in her dissatisfaction but also in the gradual manner in which she comes to recognize it. Diksha's emotional dissatisfaction initially remains largely internal. She does not immediately convert her dissatisfaction into decisive action. This hesitation reflects the influence of expectations associated with marriage and family. Her situation is consistent with the critical observation that the novel represents tensions between traditional gender roles and women's aspirations [1], [2].

The narrative becomes significant when Diksha begins to distinguish between the identity she performs within the domestic environment and the individual identity she wishes to recover. Her "secret wish list" symbolically represents desires that have remained insufficiently acknowledged. The list is therefore more than a narrative device; it becomes a representation of private self-recognition.

Diksha's transformation may be understood as a gradual process. She first recognizes emotional dissatisfaction, then identifies suppressed aspirations, and subsequently begins to reconsider the organization of her life. Her development does not mean that she ceases to possess identities associated with family and relationships. Rather, she begins to understand that these identities need not completely determine her existence. Kashyap and Richa similarly observe that Diksha's relationship with Vibha contributes to her emotional awakening and self-discovery [2]. Friendship is therefore significant to the construction of Diksha's subjectivity. Vibha provides an alternative emotional environment in which Diksha can communicate desires and reconsider her circumstances. The contrast between marriage and friendship is especially important. Within the marital environment, Diksha experiences emotional distance and dissatisfaction. Within her friendship with Vibha, communication allows her to reconsider her individual needs. The novel consequently presents identity as relational: an individual may perceive herself differently when she participates in different interpersonal relationships.

Diksha's journey can therefore be interpreted as movement from externally defined identity towards greater subjective awareness. Her transformation is not represented only through an external act of rebellion. It begins with the recognition that her emotional needs and personal aspirations deserve consideration.

3.2 Marriage, Disruption, and Identity In The Rule Breakers

The Rule Breakers presents a different form of identity conflict. Veda Thakur's understanding of herself is closely connected with marriage and with the expectations attached to being a wife. Her discovery that her husband is gay disrupts the assumptions on which her understanding of marriage has been constructed. The crisis is consequently not restricted to the question of sexuality. It also concerns Veda's understanding of herself within the marital relationship. The conventional expectation of a heterosexual marriage becomes difficult to sustain in the circumstances she encounters. The disruption forces her to reconsider what marriage means and how her own identity has been shaped by it. Kundu's study of The Rule Breakers specifically examines gender and sexuality and draws on Butler's discussion of gender and performativity [4]. This perspective is useful for understanding the novel's representation of socially expected gender identities. Marriage in the novel is surrounded by assumptions concerning masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and social respectability. Butler argues that gender is constituted through repeated social practices rather than functioning simply as a fixed internal essence [8]. In The Rule Breakers, the pressure to conform to conventional gender and heterosexual expectations becomes visible through the marital situation. The concealment of the husband's sexuality demonstrates the consequences that may arise when individual identity conflicts with socially prescribed expectations.

The novel consequently complicates a simple opposition between male and female oppression. The social structure surrounding heterosexual marriage produces pressures for different characters. Veda experiences the consequences of a marriage that does not correspond to the expectations under which she entered it, while her husband experiences the pressure associated with heterosexual norms. Veda's subsequent response is significant because she begins to distinguish her own identity from the expectations attached to the role of wife. Her self-recognition develops through the process of reconsidering what she wants from life and relationships.

The Rule Breakers therefore presents identity reconstruction as a response to disruption. Unlike Diksha's gradual recognition of dissatisfaction, Veda's self-questioning is intensified by an unexpected revelation. The two narratives consequently demonstrate different circumstances through which female subjectivity can develop.

3.3 Comparative Analysis of Diksha and Veda

Diksha and Veda experience different forms of identity conflict, but both narratives involve a movement from acceptance towards questioning. Diksha's conflict develops gradually through emotional dissatisfaction and the recognition of suppressed aspirations. Veda's conflict emerges more abruptly because an unexpected revelation changes her understanding of marriage. The difference between the two protagonists is important. Diksha's transformation begins with an internal recognition of emotional dissatisfaction, whereas Veda's transformation is intensified by a disruption that challenges the foundations of her marital identity. The two trajectories may be represented as follows:

Diksha: Domestic conformity → Emotional awareness → Personal aspiration → Identity reconstruction

Veda: Marital certainty → Unexpected disruption → Questioning of social roles → Reconstruction of self

These trajectories should not be treated as identical. They demonstrate that female subjectivity may emerge through different emotional and relational circumstances. In both cases, however, identity becomes visible when an established understanding of self becomes difficult to sustain. The comparison also demonstrates the importance of relationships. Diksha's friendship with Vibha provides an alternative emotional space, while Veda's marital relationship becomes the principal context in which her identity is challenged. Thus, relationships can function both as structures that shape identity and as spaces through which identity is reconsidered.

3.4. Discussion and Findings

The analysis indicates that Shenoy's representation of domestic life is more complex than a simple opposition between freedom and restriction. The domestic sphere contains affection, responsibility, attachment, dissatisfaction, expectation, and aspiration simultaneously. In The Secret Wish List, domesticity is associated with Diksha's emotional dissatisfaction and the suppression of personal aspirations. Astuti and Kistanto identify the novel's engagement with male domination and women's responses to oppressive structures [1]. Kashyap and Richa similarly identify self-discovery and emotional awakening as important elements of Diksha's development [2]. The present study extends these observations by focusing on domestic space as a negotiated environment. Diksha's development does not begin with an abstract rejection of domestic life. Instead, she gradually recognises that her identity cannot be reduced to her role within marriage and family. In The Rule Breakers, domestic space becomes more disruptive because the conventional meaning of marriage is challenged by the revelation concerning Veda's husband. Kundu's analysis establishes the significance of gender and sexuality in the novel [4]. The present reading places this issue within the broader question of female subjectivity. Veda's crisis is significant because it forces her to reconsider not only her husband and marriage but also her own position within the social structure surrounding them. Kumari's study of Shenoy's fiction identifies changing forms of womanhood and a movement towards greater self-sufficiency [3]. The present analysis similarly identifies an increasing awareness of individual identity in the two novels, but it emphasises negotiation rather than complete separation from social relationships. This distinction is important. Contemporary female subjectivity need not always be represented through total rejection of family, marriage, or cultural belonging. Shenoy's protagonists remain connected to relational environments even while questioning

the identities produced within those environments. Their subjectivity emerges through reflection, communication, emotional recognition, and personal decision-making. The study identifies five major findings. First, domestic space functions as a significant site of identity formation in both novels. It is simultaneously associated with social expectations and personal experience. Second, emotional dissatisfaction acts as an important stimulus for self-recognition. Diksha's awareness develops gradually through dissatisfaction with the emotional conditions of her marriage. Third, interpersonal relationships influence female subjectivity. Diksha's friendship with Vibha provides an alternative emotional environment; while Veda's marital relationship becomes the central context of her identity crisis. Fourth, the two protagonists demonstrate different forms of identity reconstruction. Diksha's transformation is gradual and internally initiated, whereas Veda's transformation is intensified by an unexpected disruption of marital expectations. Fifth, Shenoy's representation of contemporary womanhood is not limited to direct resistance. Her protagonists negotiate between social relationships and individual identity. The domestic sphere therefore operates as a space of negotiation rather than functioning exclusively as a structure of oppression.

4. Conclusion

Preeti Shenoy's The Secret Wish List and The Rule Breakers present two distinct representations of women negotiating identity within domestic and relational environments. Diksha's emotional dissatisfaction and Veda's marital disruption create different circumstances, yet both narratives examine the process through which women reconsider identities shaped by social expectations. The study demonstrates that domestic space in Shenoy's fiction is neither completely restrictive nor entirely liberating. It is a contested environment in which women experience responsibility, attachment, emotional conflict, reflection, and self-discovery. Diksha's journey illustrates the significance of suppressed aspiration and emotional recognition; whereas Veda's experience demonstrates the consequences of a disruption that challenges established assumptions about marriage and gender. The comparison further shows that female identity is relational. Friendship, marriage, and social interaction influence the ways in which the protagonists perceive themselves. At the same time, these relationships become spaces through which existing identities can be questioned and reconstructed. Shenoy's representation of female subjectivity therefore moves beyond a simple opposition between conformity and rebellion. The protagonists negotiate their individual identities within relationships rather than existing outside them. Their development suggests that self-recognition may emerge through ordinary experiences such as dissatisfaction, friendship, marital conflict, conversation, and reflection. The study consequently proposes that Shenoy's fiction can be read as a representation of negotiated female subjectivity. Identity is presented not as a permanently fixed condition but as an evolving process influenced by emotional experience, interpersonal relationships, social expectations, and individual choice.

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