

## AN ANALYSIS OF PREETI SHENOY'S *THE RULE BREAKERS* WITH REGARDS TO NEGOTIATING GENDER AND SEXUALITY

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#### Abstract

The sociocultural context of gender and sexuality in Preeti Shenoy's novel *The Rule Breakers* is the focus of this paper. With her masterwork, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler made gender and sexuality concerns more widely known. In addition to concentrating on the issue of homosexuality, Judith Butler places a significant amount of emphasis on performance in order to determine the function that gender plays. While gender is a social construct, sexuality is biological. Other sex refers to sexual orientations that don't fit neatly into either the male or female body types. Yet, only male and feminine roles are defined by culture. These two genders are also denoted in language by phrases such as "he" and "she," among others. There is no one characteristic that can determine a person's sexual orientation just based on their language use. In Shenoy's book *The Rule Breakers*, the binary gender structure has a significant impact on both the lives of the feminine characters and the lives of the characters of the opposite sex. Similarly, the normative tendency of heterosexuality or the cultural framework of heterosexuality restricts the lives of gay and lesbian and it produces sadness and disillusionment. In spite of the fact that homosexuality is now recognised by the law, there are still some individuals who are unwilling to discuss their sexual orientation for fear that it would cause them to stand out from the crowd. In *The Rule Breakers*, Shenoy examines the subjection and freedom of her character Veda, as well as the suffering of the homosexual character who is Veda's spouse. Consequently, the purpose of this research is to investigate Veda's feminist perspective as well as her husband's struggle with his sexual orientation.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Homosexuality, Gay, Gender Trouble, Shenoy.

Preeti Shenoy is one of the best-selling Indian English female writers of the twenty-first century. She is a highly prominent writer due to her attitude towards the unorthodox social practices as well as the representation of Indian people in the fictitious narrative that she creates in her novels. In her literature, Shenoy explores the ideas of gender and sexuality via her characters. Shenoy, an Indian author, explores the lives and traditions of the Indian people. This particular piece of writing addresses not only the differences that exist between homosexuality and heterosexuality but also the prejudice that exists between males and females. The topic of gender roles and sexual orientation is one that arises frequently in both the realm of literature and the larger culture at large. Sex is a biological construct, but gender is a social construct. Virginia Woolf, Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, and many others have raised their voices in opposition to the mainstream culture of gender and sexuality. Other sex refers to sexual orientations that don't fit neatly into either the male or female body. Yet, only male and feminine roles are defined by culture. These two genders are also denoted in language by phrases such as "he" and "she," among others. There is no one characteristic that can

determine a person's sexual orientation just based on their use of language. Similar to how the normal tendency of heterosexuality makes life more difficult for homosexual and lesbian people, it also leads to feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment. In spite of the fact that homosexuality is now recognised by the law, there are still some individuals who are unwilling to discuss their sexual orientation for fear that it would cause them to stand out from the crowd. But, the purpose of this essay is to make an attempt to demonstrate how author Preeti Shenoy deals with the binary idea of gender and sexuality in her work of fiction, *The Rule Breakers*.

The primary, secondary, and tertiary goals of this research paper are, in that order, to examine the troubling situation of female and other sex in society and literature; to investigate the normative trends of heterosexuality; and, finally, to concentrate on Preeti Shenoy's treatment of gender and sexuality. Shenoy is regarded as one of the most successful authors, and her most famous work is titled *Life Is What You Make It*. She began writing professionally with *34 Bubble Gum & Candy*, and her most recent work is *A Place Called Home*. Preeti Shenoy, who is now 50 years old, has written more than fifteen literary masterpieces. Her literary and non-fictional writings include *A Hundred Tiny Flames*, *It Happens for a Reason*, *The Rule Breakers* (2018), and *Wake up Life Is Calling*, *When Love Came Calling*, and others. As a writer of the twenty-first century, Preeti Shenoy portrays the modern social environment of India, which displays the normative or customary patterns in the lives and culture of the Indian people. The painful circumstances as well as the suffering status of Indian women are exposed by Shenoy's woman self. In the course of the development of Indian literature written in English, it is important to note that not only female authors show the landscape of the female psyche, but also many male authors paint the scenario of a widow and a house wife at various points in time.

Rohini in Bankim's novel, Binodini in Tagore's, and Abhaya and Kiranmayi in Sarat Chandra's are widows all, but there is an increasingly bolder approach to the actualities of life; and the more recent the study, it is also the more forthright in its defiance of convention and affirmation of the widow's even the widows—right to life, freedom and love. (Iyengar, 2003, p. 218)

There are more authors besides Bankim-Tagore-Sarat, including Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyaya, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabani Bhatyacharjyaya, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhuti Roy, and Amitav Ghosh. All those writers deal with the topic of gender, since the role of the female characters is one of the predominant themes in their great works. "Anita Desai has revealed the feminine psychology of neurotic women via the characters of Sita in *Where Should We Go this summer* and Maya in *Cry the Peacock*" (Gopal, 1999, p. 28) in her work *Voices in the City*, Monisha and Amla are once again dominant characters. As a result, we may come to the conclusion that gender discrimination is to blame for the misery and disillusionment that occurs in the lives of the female characters in works of fiction as well as the women who live in today's society.

Earlier, women had nearly no rights. They could not vote, they could not own property and they were treated with absolutely no respect or regard. They were, in fact, considered to be of no value on their own. Women were expected to do just one thing and that was to stay at home and take care of their husbands and children. If a woman did choose to work outside of her home, there were few jobs to choose from. Most women worked as clerks, nurses, schoolteachers and other traditionally female activities. Women began to grow very frustrated and they realized that something had to change. (Literature and Gender, 2004, p. 30)

The above quoted lines depict the scenario of the female characters who are destined to take care of the household activities for the sake of the family. A woman takes responsibilities of wifehood and motherhood throughout her life. Even the activities are limited and restricted in respect of her role as a woman. Therefore, feminist critics raise questions on the performative quality of a woman. The women characters are subjugated in the patriarchal society. Sometimes they are not allowed to do certain work even if they can do the job. Thus, women are controlled in the male dominated society for gender discrimination. In the book, *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*, Dr R. S. Pathak (1998) says,

The earlier novels by Indian women novelists project the traditional image of woman. But as times changed, the portrayal became realistic with a thrust on her sense of frustration and alienation. The characters created by them, like their creators, were torn apart by the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. Their crisis of value adaptation and attachment with family and home pulled them asunder. The plight of the working woman was still worse, aggravated by her problems of marital adjustment and quest for and assertion of her identity. (p. 12)

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* both address current gender concerns. With particular attention to the needs and requirements of a woman, Woolf emphasizes the landscape of the feminine world. But, according to de Beauvoir, "society imposes manners, attitudes, activities, and language that are congruent with the biological sexual identity of a baby. Answer in the form of the queen of the game, an an an a, in a moment, and in a moment," (Beauvoir 18). The biological characteristics of a person are readily apparent and distinguishable from one another. But, the framework of male and female that exists in society renders them men and women. He makes the idea of becoming a woman more widely accepted. A girl child does not automatically possess all of the qualities that are traditionally associated with femininity; rather, she develops into a woman as a result of the conventional social behaviors. In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler, a famous philosopher, popularized the topics of gender and sexuality. Judith Butler places an emphasis on the significance of performance in order to determine the function that gender plays, and at the same time, she is concerned with the issue of homosexuality. Morgenroth and Ryan noted Butler's philosophical approach in the following ways in their study effort, *Gender Trouble in Social Psychology*. "There is a belief that a baby born with penis will grow up to identify and act as a man whatever that means in a specific culture and, as part of this gender role, be sexually attracted to women. Similarly, there is a belief that a baby born with a vagina will

grow up to identify and act as a woman and as a part of this gender role, be sexually attracted to men”. (Mizpah, 2022, p. 67)

Judith Butler addresses the difficulties faced by women and persons of other sexes due to prejudice based on gender in her seminal book, *Gender Trouble*. Butler also discusses the difficulties faced by homosexual individuals. So, the concerns around sex and gender serve as the masterpiece’s fulcrum or focal point of interest. The notion of sexuality is reflected in the quotation that was just presented. Following the idea that a man will become sexually attracted to a woman and that a woman will be sexually attracted to a guy is the conventionally accepted standard in society. This idea has been around for quite some time. This is one of the various structures that make up the sociocultural framework of gender. As a result, we might conclude that it is nothing more than the binary structure of gender and sexuality. In the universe of words, which only distinguishes between he and she, there is no room for other sex and homosexuality. If the and the challenges presented by the and the challenges presented by the and the challenges in the body.

Much emphasis is placed on the correlation between heterosexuality and gender in highly gendered countries where heterosexuality is the social norm and homosexuality is frowned upon. So, being drawn to men is an essential component of being feminine, and being attracted to women is an essential component of being masculine. Hence, a heterosexual identity is absorbed into a gender identity to the point where the two are conceptually confused. Hence, masculine males are viewed as sexually dominating, active, and initiating, whereas feminine women are viewed as sexually docile, receptive, and submissive.

The ideology relating to feminine and masculine qualities is summed up in the phrases that have just been given. The biological identification of a man or a woman influences the roles, behaviors, abilities, and speech patterns that are appropriate in society. Conventional heterosexuality, like gender discrimination, impedes the lives of gay persons. The idea of a man and female having a sexual connection is the offspring of the binary concept of male and female. On the other hand, it could seem weird at first when a man develops a sexual attraction to another man or when a woman develops a sexual attraction to another woman. Gay relationships appear to be odd, uncommon, peculiar, bizarre, and quirky. As a result, members of the society who lean towards any unorthodox activity in the culture are marginalized. In point of fact, it has been discovered that although some people adhere to the accepted rules of conventional society, others rebel against them.

Shenoy’s *The Rule Breakers* deals with both types of characters and her protagonist revolts against the norm. The title of the novel connotes the same. Shenoy’s Veda in the novel, *The Rule Breakers*, is a typical Indian woman who becomes the victim of gender discrimination. Veda could not continue her studies due to early marriage. She protests against such a societal framework. She says: “‘Why can’t I get a job and work, papa? Why should only Animesh have that privilege?’ Veda wanted to ask” (Shenoy, 2018, p. 9). Her mother’s words relate to the conventional picture of the women in the male dominated society. “Sometimes, you have to sacrifice what you want in the interests of the family” (p. 22). “She had been taught by her mother to never talk back to her elders, especially to her father. It was disrespectful, she was

told. So she and her sisters would silently listen to her father's rants" (p. 9). Through Veda's character, Shenoy depicts the psychological dilemma of a female character. Not only Veda, but also her other sisters know the conventional norms and practices. Hence, they remain silent and they have to follow the traditional customs in the orthodox society. The narrator in the novel expresses the ideology in the following words.

None of the girls minded that Animesh was treated differently by their parents. He was undoubtedly their favourite child. Being the baby of the family, he was pampered by his sisters as well as by their parents. While their father didn't much care about the academic performance of the girls, he monitored his son's progress at school like a hawk watching its prey. If his grades slipped, he immediately summoned Veda. (Shenoy, 2018, p. 9)

Because of this, it is still hard for girls to get an education and do well in school. A girl's life is consumed with that same habit from the time she is young. The heroine, Veda, however, speaks out against such dominance and wants to finish her study once she gets married. Even though things get harder and harder for Veda, she is still able to keep studying throughout *The Rule Breakers*. Veda starts to question herself. "Is this all there is to a girl's existence, she wonders to herself? Get married and move out of the house you've lived in your whole life? What was she getting herself into? Why hadn't she paid attention to what Suraj had to say and spoken up? Why didn't she have the guts to speak up for herself and say what it was that she wanted?." (Shenoy, 2018, p. 54)

Similar to Preeti Shenoy, another Indian author, Shashi Deshpande, discusses the roles of women and how they are treated unfairly. In *That Long Silence*, Pramod Kumar Singh and R. K. Gupta makes reference to Deshpande's viewpoints towards Jaya. The book offers a harsh critique of several aspects of our social structures, such as marriage and families. For example, when Jaya tells Mohan that he should handle the cooking when she is pregnant, Mohan is very amused by this advice and believes that cooking is not a man's job. As an Indian female author, Preeti Shenoy uses her fictional narrative to paint a picture of the diversity that exists among the Indian people. Every one of her books reflects the socio political and economic climate of India and, more specifically, the role that gender inequality plays in the country. Shenoy presents the mother figure as a feeble and submissive lady who lives her entire life for the benefit of her husband and children. The thoughts presented above are articulated in the words that follow.

Their mother was a frail woman, mostly because she neglected her diet and health. Giving birth to five children had taken a toll on her. She was a passive woman, showing no interest in anything, going through the motions of daily life as a matter of routine. It seemed like she had resigned from life itself. She was meek and unassertive and went along with everything that her husband said. (Shenoy, 2018, p. 5)

Thus, the normative practice of the male dominated society intends to subdue women. Such orthodox society was so "rude, unbearable, suppressive, oppressive and depressive" (Singh,

2001, p. 89). Preeti Shenoy describes the agonies and miseries of the woman character through her protagonist, Veda in the novel, *The Rule Breakers* (2018).

Veda felt that her dreams were dying a slow death. With each passing day, she felt as if she was fading into oblivion. She was finding marriage and all the responsibilities that came with it a gigantic burden to bear. She felt stifled, imprisoned, suppressed. She saw no escape. It was a prison she had willingly walked. Now she was trapped. (Shenoy, 2018, p. 79)

However, towards the end of the novel, *The Rule Breakers* (Shenoy, 2018), Veda revolts against the conventional rules and dogmas. The title itself reveals the fact that she breaks the rule. "Shashi Deshpande presents a new concept of feminist element in this novel" (Singh, 2001, p. 92), *That Long Silence*. In an article, *The Concept of New-Woman in Shashi Deshpande's Novel: That long Silence*, Pramod Kumar Singh says,

Jaya, for her seventeen years past life, has tried to play the role of a traditional woman, the embodiment of tolerance, suffering and courage. However, she becomes the modern egotistical self-assertive rebellious woman—all those being marks of new-woman. The desertion of the conventional passive and submissive role and adoption of the new role present a woman's perspective on the world and it focuses on women's issues. (Singh, 2001, p. 94)

Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988) and Veda in *The Rule Breakers* (2018) epitomize the modern woman who rebels against the intolerable tolerance of social ideology and dogma in a patriarchal society. This remark makes it very evident that "a woman should not exceed the reasonable limits and should not violate the traditional norms of Indian society" (Rai, 2001, p. 32). The clash between traditional and non-traditional elements in Indian culture is revealed in an essay written by R. N. Rai titled *Kamala Markandaya's Two Virgins: A Study in Tradition and Modernity*.

The irreconcilable difference is not only concentrating on gender discrimination but also the approach towards homosexuality. The manner in which Shenoy deals with sexuality is yet another extremely significant aspect of this book. Here, Shenoy highlights the challenges faced by a gay character named Bhuwan, who is also Veda's spouse. Bhuwan makes a conscious effort to conceal the fact that he is homosexual, and he continues to have sexual relations with Vikky even after he has wed Veda.

Bhuwan had reluctantly agreed to meet the girl. His marriage had been a topic for a year now. When he had agreed for the process to start, his mother had gone into a tizzy, arranging meetings with prospective girls. Bhuwan hadn't liked any of them and had turned all of them down. He was sure that this one would be no different. (Shenoy, 2018, p. 43)

Bhuwan in *The Rule Breakers* (Shenoy, 2018) hesitates to marry a woman, though ultimately he succumbs to the conventional norm of sexuality. However, for his social recognition, Bhuwan hides his sexual attraction to a male friend, Vikky. It is Bhuwan who represents the

suffering world of the other sex. The homosexual relation is legally allowed in the twenty-first century, still some people dare not to expose in fear of alienation. The legal acceptance has not yet been conventional and normative in contemporary Indian society. When Veda discovers her husband's homosexual relation with Vikky, she manages separation from her husband. Finally, she arranged marriage between Bhuwan and Vikky. Bhuwan says, "People have so many misconceptions about gay men" (Shenoy, 2018, p. 297).

Like any other group of people, we homosexual men are attracted only to certain types of men who spark our interest. Everyone thinks that just because we are gay, we will have sexual desire for all men. That is absurd! Straight men think they should be afraid of us as we may hit on them, which is ridiculous. Gay men are not predatory, and it's not like we cannot control our desires and that we lust after every man. (Shenoy, 2018, p. 297)

Sexuality, as mentioned earlier, is based on the binary structure of male and female— based on male-female physical attraction. People fail to come out of several misconceptions about the gay and lesbian people.

Then there's another misconception. People think that gay men are promiscuous and have multiple partners. That's simply not true. Sexual promiscuity is a human phenomenon. It's not restricted to men alone whether straight or gay. We gays are a misunderstood lot. (Shenoy, 2018, p. 298)

When seen from the perspective of gender and sexuality, the novel *The Rule Breakers* makes it abundantly evident that the social framework of gender is built using the notion of binary. This is demonstrated in a clear and convincing manner throughout the novel. As was said before, there is no such thing as a determining word in language that can be used to describe the persons who belong to the group of bodies that are neither male nor female. In this binary organization, men hold the central position, and women are relegated to the outlying areas of a male-dominated society. The same thing happens to Veda while she is at school: she sees that her brother Animesh is accorded all of the benefits due to the fact that he is a man, while she is denied education due to the fact that she is a girl. Such prejudice occurs within the binary concept of male and female. Heterosexuality is the binary idea of sex. In light of this, homosexuality does not have a place in the social practices that are generally accepted, despite the fact that it is not illegal. It is made abundantly evident throughout this piece of writing that Preeti Shenoy addresses problems pertaining to gender and sexuality in order to demonstrate her stance with regard to the unconventional standard.

To summarize, Shenoy challenges the dominant attitudes on gender and sexuality. To draw attention to the negative status of homosexuality, Shenoy here portrays Bhuwan's persona. In order to escape the unending misery of her marriage, Shenoy's character Veda makes an effort to mainstream the concept of homosexuality by dismantling the structural forms of gender and sexuality. Shenoy's Bhuwan is afraid to divulge his true identity, but Veda, Bhuwan's wife, is driven to the point of desperation and is willing to end their marriage in order to protect both of them. After being separated from Bhuwan, she makes arrangements for him to marry Vikky.

In the conclusion of the book, Veda is finally able to overcome all of the mental obstacles that she faced as a result of her marriage.

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