



## **Negotiating Gender and Sexuality: A Study of Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers***

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### **Abstract**

The present paper deals with the societal framework of gender and sexuality in Preeti Shenoy's novel, *The Rule Breakers*. Judith Butler popularized the issues of 'gender' and 'sex' in her masterpiece, *Gender Trouble*. Judith Butler gives importance to the performance in order to establish the role of gender as well as she focuses on the trouble of homosexuality. 'Sex' is biological, whereas 'gender' is socially constructed. Apart from male and female bodies there is another sex that is called other sex. But the society defines only masculine and feminine. Language also denotes these two genders through the terms like 'he' and 'she'. In the field of language there is no single determining factor to detect the other sex. This binary structure of gender affects a great deal in the lives of female characters as well as of the other sex in Shenoy's novel, *The Rule Breakers*. Similarly, the normative trend of heterosexuality or the societal framework of heterosexuality hampers the lives of gay and lesbian and it causes despair and disappointment. In spite of the legal acceptance, some people dare not to reveal the nature of homosexuality, as it may separate them from the rest of the people. In *The Rule Breakers* Shenoy's treatment of gender and sexuality explores the subjugation and liberation of Shenoy's Veda as well as the agony of the gay, Veda's husband. Therefore, the present study aims at discovering the feminist approach of Veda and the crisis of gay identity for Veda's husband.

**Keywords:** Feminist, Gay, Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, Subjugation.

### **Introduction**

Preeti Shenoy, one of the best seller Indian English female novelists of the twenty first century is a very notable writer for her approach towards the unconventional social practices as well as the portrayal of Indian people in the fictional narration. Shenoy's characters explore the notion of gender and sexuality in her fiction. Being an Indian novelist, Shenoy depicts the lives and culture of the Indian people. The present paper deals with the discrimination between male and female as well as the disparities between homosexuality and heterosexuality. The subject of gender and sexuality is a very common phenomenon in the society as well as in the field of literature. Sex is biologically originated, whereas, gender is socially constructed. Virginia Woolf, Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir and all others raise voices to protest against the normative culture of gender and sexuality. Apart from the male and female bodies there is another sex that is called other sex. But the society defines only masculine and feminine. Language also denotes these two genders through the terms like 'he' and 'she'. In the field of

language there is no single determining factor to detect the other sex. Similarly, the normative trend of heterosexuality hampers the lives of gay and lesbian and it causes despair and disappointment. In spite of the legal acceptance, some people dare not to reveal the nature of homosexuality, as it may separate them from the rest of the people. However, in this article an attempt has been made to show how Preeti Shenoy treats with the binary concept of gender and sexuality in her fictional narration, *The Rule Breakers* (2018).

The major three objectives of this paper are- to analyse the troubling situation of female and other sex in the society and literature, to explore the normative trends of heterosexuality, and finally, to focus on Preeti Shenoy's treatment of gender and sexuality. Shenoy is one of the popular novelists for her notable masterpiece, *Life Is What You Make It* (2011). She started her writing career with *34 Bubble-gum and Candies* (2008) and her latest book is *A Place Called Home* (2022). 50 years old of Preeti Shenoy writes more than fifteen literary works. Her fictional and non-fictional works are *A Hundred Little Flames* (2017), *It Happens for a Reason* (2014), *The Rule Breakers* (2018), *Wake Up Life Is Calling* (2019), *When Love Came Calling* (2020) and etc. As a novelist of the twenty first century, Preeti Shenoy reflects the contemporary Indian social milieu that reveals the normative or conventional trends in the lives and culture of the Indian people. Shenoy's woman self exposes the tormenting situation as well as the suffering state of the Indian women. In the history of Indian English literature, one must notice that not only women writers depict the panorama of the female psyche but also many male writers portray the scenario of widow and house wife down the ages.

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)

Besides, Bankim-Tagore-Sarat, there are other writers such as Tarasankar Bandyopadhyaya, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyaya, Manik Bandyopadhyaya, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharyya, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri and etc. in the field of Indian English literature. All those writers deal with the matter of gender, as the role of the female characters is one of the pre-dominant themes in their remarkable works. "Through the character of Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer* and Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, Anita Desai has portrayed the feminine psyche of neurotic women." (Gopal, 1999, p. 28) Again Monisha and Amla are two dominating characters in her novel, *Voices in the City* (1965). Therefore, we may say that the gender discrimination causes suffering and disappointment in the lives of the female characters in literature as well as of the women in the 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 question on the performative

quality of a woman. The women characters are dominated and 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 the 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)

Virginia Woolf in her novel *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir in the work *The Second Sex* (1949) focus on the burning issues of gender. Woolf emphasises on the panorama of the female world with special reference to the need and requirement of a woman. However, according to de Beauvoir, Society imposes the manners, attitude, activity and talk, in accordance with, the biological sexual identity of a baby. "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 18). The biological discrimination of a person is clearly manifested. However, the societal framework of male and female makes them men and women. He popularizes the notion of becoming woman. A girl child is not born with all the so called feminine characteristics, rather, she becomes a woman with the normative social practices. A great philosopher, Judith Butler popularized the issues of 'gender' and 'sex' in her masterpiece, *Gender Trouble*. Judith Butler gives importance to the performance in order to establish the role of gender as well as she focuses on the trouble of homosexuality. In a research work, *Gender Trouble in Social Psychology*, Morgenroth and Ryan (2018) observed Butler's philosophical approach in the following ways.

"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 a part of this gender role, be sexually attracted to men". (Mizpah, 2022, p. 67)

In her critical masterwork, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler deals with the trouble of the woman and other sex for the gender discrimination as well as the misfortune of the homosexual people. Thus, the issues of sex and gender is the pivotal or centre of attraction in her masterpiece. The above mentioned quote reflects the idea of sexuality—the conventional norm of the society is to follow the notion that a man becomes sexually attracted to a woman and a woman be sexually attracted to a man. This is one of the specific structures in the societal framework of gender. Therefore, we may say that it is nothing but the binary structure of gender and sexuality. There is no place for other sex and homosexuality in the world of language that determines only 'he' and 'she'. The concept and conflict of gender and sexuality is now expressed in the following ways.

Highly gendered societies, in which heterosexuality is the social norm and homosexuality is disapproved of, place a strong emphasis on the link between gender and heterosexuality. Thus, an integral part of being feminine is to be attracted to men and of being masculine is to be attracted to women. A heterosexual identity thus becomes subsumed into a gender identity such that the two are conflated conceptually. This conflation is evident in the sexual stereotypes of traditional Judaeo-Christian-Islamic societies. Thus, masculine men are seen as sexually dominant, active, incentive and initiating whereas feminine women are sexually passive, receptive and submissive.

(Johnson, 2007, p. 33)

The above mentioned words conclude with the very known ideological concept regarding feminine and masculine quality. Society determines the role, behavior, ability and speech, in accordance with, the biological identity of a male and a female. Like gender discrimination, the normative heterosexuality hampers the lives of the homosexual people. The binary concept of male and female begets the idea of male-female sexual relationship. However, initially it appears to be strange, when a male becomes sexually attracted to a male and a female to a female. Homosexual relationship appears to be abnormal, unusual, peculiar, strange and eccentric. Therefore, the people of the society alienate those people who incline towards any unconventional practice in the society. In reality, it is found that some people follow the traditional norms and others protest against the customs of the orthodox society. Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* (2018) deals with the 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* (2018), is a typical Indian woman who becomes the victim of the gender discrimination. Veda could not continue her study due to early marriage. She protests against such 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 favorite 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)

Thus, the girl child remains deprived of the academic performance and education. That very malpractice consumes the life of a girl from her childhood days. However, among them Veda, the protagonist raises voice against such domination and she seeks to continue her education after her marriage. Though, it becomes very difficult for Veda, she successfully carries on her education in the novel, *The Rule Breakers* (2018). Veda raises questions within herself. She asks her own self— "Is this all there was to a girl's life? Get married and leave the home you have known all your life? What was she getting into? Why had not she listened to Suraj and protested? Why didn't she have the courage to stand up for herself, and express what she wanted?" (Shenoy, 2018, p. 54)

Like Preeti Shenoy, another Indian novelist Shashi Deshpande delineates the role of female characters as well as the discrimination of male female characters. Pramod Kumar Singh and R. K. Gupta mentions Deshpande's perspectives about Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988). "The novel presents a scathing aspect of our social institutions like marriage or family. For instance, during her pregnancy, when Jaya advises Mohan that he should do the cooking, Mohan is highly amused by this advice and thinks that cooking is not a man's business". (Singh, 2001, p. 91) Preeti Shenoy, as an Indian female novelist, depicts the panorama of the Indian people in her fictional narration. All her novels reflect the Indian socio-political and economic

scenario that reveals the role of gender discrimination. Shenoy portrays the mother character as a frail and passive woman who dedicates her whole life for the sake of her husband and children. The following words express the aforementioned ideas.

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) are the epitome of new-woman who revolt against the unbearable tolerance of the social doctrine and dogma in the patriarchal society. This observation clearly manifests that “a woman should not go beyond the reasonable limits and should not violate the traditional norms of Indian society” (Rai, 2001, p. 32) R. N. Rai in an article, “Kamala Markandaya’s *Two Virgins*: A Study in Tradition and Modernity” reveals the conflict between conventional and unconventional trends in Indian society.

The irreconcilable difference is not only concentrating on the gender discrimination, but also the approach towards homosexuality. Another very important area of this novel is Shenoy’s treatment of sexuality. Shenoy here marks the difficulties of a gay character named Bhuwan, Veda’s husband. Bhuwan intentionally hides his homosexual nature and he continues his sexual relation with Vikky even after his marriage with 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 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 the contemporary Indian society. When Veda discovers her husband's homosexual relation with Vikky, she manages separation from her husband. Finally, she arranges 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)

Shenoy's Bhuwan dare not reveal his identity, but Veda, Bhuwan's wife becomes desperate enough to cut the marital relation and to expose her husband's real identity for the wellbeing of their both. She arranges Bhuwan's marriage with Vikky after getting divorced from him. Veda, at the end of the novel, becomes free from all the psychological hurdles of her marital life.

A close reading of the novel, *The Rule Breakers* (Shenoy, 2018) from the aspect of gender and sexuality clearly exhibits that the societal framework of gender is constructed within the concept of binary (such as male and female). There is no such determining sign in language, as mentioned earlier, to indicate the people who belong to the group of other sex than male and female bodies. In this binary structure male occupies the position of center, whereas, female belongs to the group of periphery in the male dominated society. Veda in her school days feels the same, as she finds that her brother Animesh gets all the privileges because of his male identity, and she becomes deprived of education for her female identity. Such discrimination takes place within the twofold construction of male and female. The binary concept of sex stands for heterosexual (such as sex between male and female). Therefore, homosexuality gets no place in the conventional social practice, though it is legally permissible. In the present paper it is clearly manifested that Preeti Shenoy deals with the issues of gender and sexuality to establish her approach towards the eccentric norm.

To conclude, we may say that Shenoy raises voice against the conventional approaches towards gender and sex. Shenoy here depicts Bhuwan's character to focus on the problematic situation of homosexuality. Shenoy's Veda attempts to normalize the notion of homosexuality in order to get rid of the endless suffering of her marital life. However, Shenoy tries to deconstruct those structural form of gender and sexuality. In an article, "An Analysis on the Concept of a New Woman: A Case Study of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai's Fiction" Monali Mohan Rao Pohane (2016) observes that "Shashi Deshpande claims that only a woman

writer can portray and tell the complete story of a woman, from the inside as it were.” (p. 3)

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