



NEGOTIATING THE SELF IN THE CITY: URBANISATION AND MENTAL HEALTH IN PREETI SHENOY'S "LIFE IS WHAT YOU MAKE IT"

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the work "Life is what you make it" by Preeti Shenoy from an Indian Psyche perspective. The protagonist, Ankita Sharma's journey from Cochin to Mumbai and the transformation in her character that she undergoes during this transition will help this research paper to understand the mental health of contemporary youth. It will also provide a clear picture of the trauma and emotional conflict faced by the youth. This study will help the reader to understand mental disorder, which have become more common in the contemporary world. It also examines the disadvantages of urbanisation, which leads to mental health disorders. This study highlights the academic pressures, isolation faced by the youngsters in the city space. It also discusses about the importance of the family support and their support to the children, which is a pillar for the young generation. Overall it portrays how urbanisation affects the next generation mentally.

Keywords: Urbanisation, mental health, isolation, self-realisation and trauma.

Introduction

This research paper examines urbanisation and mental health in contemporary society through Preeti Shenoy's "Life is what you make it". Urbanisation is the key feature of today's modern world. On one side, it focuses on development, enjoyment and success, but on the other side lies in silent isolation in the urban cities, which makes people undergo various psychological issues. Literature always portrays the reality of the world, and in this research, it also deals with the reality of society in the modern, busy world. Louis Wirth states urban transition as "impersonal, superficial and transitory" (Wirth 12). Preeti Shenoy, a prominent

contemporary writer, emphasises the importance of mental health in her works, particularly in the novel “Life is What You Make it”.

This novel, “Life is what you make it”, reflects Shenoy’s personal experience, which is portrayed by the protagonist, Ankita Sharma. At the beginning of the novel, Ankita is a college student and highly ambitious. During her college days, she fell in love with a person called Vaibhav, but unfortunately, due to a misunderstanding, he committed suicide. This incident creates a big impact on our protagonist's life, which leads to a mental breakdown. She was identified as having bipolar disorder, and the second half of the novel deals with her recovery from this bipolar disorder.

This study describes how Ankita represents Indian contemporary youth and their lives in the city space. It also shows the various pressures handled by each youngster in today’s world. Urban life might seem to be an enjoyable one, but the reality is different, which will be examined in this study. The pressure of academic, peer, societal and family creates an impact on the lives of the youth. This paper creates an awareness about mental illness in urban cities. It also gives hope; that any problem can be overcome with the willpower of the individual.

Urban Space and Psychological Pressure

In today’s globalised society, the urban lifestyle is playing an important role. When Ankita moved to Delhi for pursuing MBA, her life also changed. Even though she lived in a city with many people around, she still felt disconnected from the world. She was striving to balance her personal life with her academic commitments. Shenoy says, “Delhi was exciting, overwhelming and intimidating all at once” (Shenoy 84).

Urban lifestyle offers opportunities for entertainment, but when it comes to success, it puts pressure and compels one to meet societal expectations. Which may not be easy for everyone to meet. Erik Erikson describes this as “a sense of inner loneliness” (Erikson 261). In this novel, the protagonist faces such an issue. When Ankita was mentally disturbed, this city life didn’t provide her emotional support; instead, it just dislocated her from society, which made her mental health much worse.

Isolation and Identity Crisis

Another important problem Ankita faced in this urbanised society was her crisis of identity. She was unable to understand her purpose in that competitive world. Because city life always judged people by their achievements, success and status. Since Ankita was unable to fulfil that due to personal issues, she was unable to survive in that society. City life somehow provides an isolation to the people with their busy lifestyle; people are too concerned about their status, they fail to concentrate on their emotional life, which in turn makes them feel isolated, even though they are surrounded by many, Georg Simmel describes the urban lifestyle as “a protective emotional distance” (Simmel 14)

Urbanisation made Anikta's isolation even worse. Although she moved to Delhi with her parents, she felt isolated due to her parents' lack of understanding. Generally, common people think urban life has more enjoyment, but they fail to understand the alienation behind it. Ankita feels disconnected from the people and from studies; she accepts that even though she was academically successful, she feels “alone in a city full of people” (Shenoy 118).

Urban lifestyle and Emotion

Urban lifestyle in cities breaks the emotional connection, which affects the mental health of most of the people in metropolitan cities. It was the same for Ankita's life; she had to deal with many things simultaneously when she moved to Delhi. She had dealt with classes, deadlines, expectations, and academics, because of which she hardly bothered about her emotions. Although she was internally fighting, she didn't have time to focus on that since she had other routines. She mentions that her life is “mechanical, as though I was merely going through the motions” (Shenoy 146).

The city demands continuous busy life, which doesn't leave anyone time to take care of their personal life. Ankita got caught in this busy city life and stopped giving importance to her psychological health. As Richard Sennett states, “modern urban life produces emotional withdrawal” (Sennett15). Because of it, as days passed, she became more fragile and emotionally weak. Through Anikita's character, we can understand how urban resident neglected their psychological health.

Impact of family members

Family plays a major role in Ankita's life; it was because of her parents that she initially had to undergo that trauma. Her parents found her old letters and questioned her about it which made her mental health to get affected. Her parents failed to understand her feelings because of their traditional mindset. They also failed to understand the urban lifestyle, because of the generational gap. Laing points out that "the family may Function as a source of emotional distress rather than support" (Laing 34). They didn't give much importance to mental health, which made Ankita's situation even worse.

In everyone's life, family members are more important, but sometimes they will become an obstacle, too. Especially in Anikta's life, although they really care for her, unfortunately, they became the reason for her illness as well. She stated that "their concern was mixed with helplessness and silence" (Shenoy 206). Through these lines, it is clear that sometimes parents may think that they are helping their children, but they might actually accept their mental health of the child. Lack of communication between parents and children in urban life can also be a major reason, because both parents and children are busy in urban cities, so they fail to communicate with each other.

Trauma and internal conflict

Trauma and internal conflict shape the character of Ankita in this novel, like Shoney's other novels; this doesn't have a sudden shock, but it gradually breaks down Ankita's emotions. Ankita accepts "out of control, as though my own mind had turned against me" (Shenoy 154), she says she has lost her control over herself and her own mind has turned against her. Because she starts to feel the pressure in her studies and loneliness in her city which really hurt her mentally these feelings slowly affect her mind. She didn't have anyone in such a big city to her feelings, which also made her situation even worse.

She felt she was emotionally disconnected from society; this made her weak and helpless. As Herman explains, "trauma isolates; it disconnects the survivor from ordinary relationships" (52). This emotional loneliness was kept growing her, she longed for someone to share it, but none of her family members understood her, especially her parents. So, the reason for her trauma was not just one particular event, but it was gradually increasing one after the other. Ankita's character represents if emotional pain is hidden for a long time, it causes major issues.

Self- Realisation

Ankita's self-realisation is an important phase of the novel, where she realises that academic success and other factors alone don't change her life; she must accept her condition and face the world boldly. Ankita says, "life is not about what happens to you, but about how you deal with it" (Shenoy267). After understanding this truth, she started to accept herself without any shame. As Carl Rogers states in the book *On Becoming a Person*, "the curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am" (Rogers17). This is where Anikta gains her courage and tries to rebuild her life.

Finally, Ankita had to undergo lots of treatment because of the delay in identifying the problem by her parents. Because generally in Indian society, people lack understanding of bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder is a serious mental problem which has to be given immediate treatment, or else it will make the situation worse. This was her self – realisation phase, where she had the courage to rebuild her life. She stopped expecting others support in the healing process, and she just gave importance to herself and recovered.

Conclusion

This novel, "Life is What You Make it", represents the impact of urbanisation. Through Ankita's mental health, Shenoy portrays the effect of the urban lifestyle, which has affected many lives psychologically. This novel portrays the struggle to balance busy city life with pressuring mental health. This study also gives the importance of mental health and family support. It also teaches how every individual has to overcome these pressures in their modern life.

The novel portrays that mental illness is important to address. And it also teaches how self-realisation is equally important for every human on this world, especially in today's society. This novel creates an awareness about mental health and the urban lifestyle. It also teaches the reader how recovery is also possible if one take effect and gives importance for self-care. Ankita's recovery also teaches the readers the importance of family support, society involvement and self-care. Ultimately, this novel becomes a guide for the present society for the improvement of emotional and mental health.

Overall, the novel creates an awareness about the emotional balance, family support and self-realisation which is most needed for the contemporary world. It not only portrays the reality of city life but also gives hope to every individual that urban pressures, isolation and trauma can be overcome through strong

willpower and self-care. Therefore, the character Ankita Sharma in the novel “Life is what you make it”, becomes an example of how urbanisation has an impact on mental health. At the same time, it can be balanced and also be healed through the self- realisation of each individual.

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