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# Quest for Self-Identity and Independence of Women in Preeti Shenoy's The Secret Wishlist

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## Abstract :

Preeti Shenoy 's THE SECRET WISHLIST is an interesting story of a lady who attempts to recover control of her life and battle against the issues that have made her life exhausting and dull. The Secret Wishlist is likewise a grasping story that one see in and around occurring with many wedded ladies in India. This story is a mission of viewing as the 'own identity' and engaging with the outside world. Written in an itemized way and strong portrayal, this novel acquaints readers with characters that are perfectly outlined and accompanied profound qualities. Here in this paper, much spotlight is on the independence of women protagonists as they continued looking for explicit space in existence with character and uniqueness.

**Key words :** Self-identity, True self, and Suppression.

## Introduction :

Shenoy has set all the protagonists with the zeal to assert themselves for self-independence in an orthodox modern society which is still bounded with the traditional surrounding. At the same time, her women characters rebel against deep-rooted family unit values and the organization of the marriage to covet self -autonomy and self-esteem not only outside the home but inside too. Shenoy has basically written about female; their matrimony, life after conjugal bond, their pursuit of individuality, their suffering and predicament if failing to accomplish the aspired outcome in their life. 'Quest for Identity' in the novel of PreetiShenoy "The Secret Wishlist" "Novel present the changing image of women; moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring women, self- sacrificing women towards self-assured, assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands and in this way providing a medium of self-expression." The Indian woman is caught in flux of tradition and modernity saddled with burden of the past to cast off her aspirations. In the novels of PreetiShenoy the women go

through transitional phase where they become different from traditional women and want to tread new paths. The modern woman does not find any sense in such self-sacrifice and yearns for self-expression, individuality, and self-identity. A woman is never regarded as an autonomous being since she has always been assigned a subordinate and a relative position.

Preeti Shenoy's women characters are passionate about life, determined towards their careers, independent, bold and unfettered. They are in the thirst of identity filled with individuality. The reader can easily connect them and sympathize with the protagonist, her sufferings and her quest for happiness. The story portrays the woeful plight of a woman in typical patriarchal society, where her personal interests have no place. They propel out the idea of being a traditional self-sacrificing and self-denying woman. Diksha, the protagonist, like an average Indian woman, accepts whatever forced upon her, first by her parents and then by her husband. But life is not merely accepting what it offers. And it is never late to start when you are poised to turn your dreams into reality.

The story revolves around Diksha, Ankit, Tanu, Sandeep and Abhay. It started off in Chennai, where, as a sixteen-year-old, Diksha was like any other typical teenager. Diksha an intelligent enthusiastic girl in her sixteen excels in her academics which add proud to her parents. Her best friend Tanu spends hours and hours of time studying, discussing their latest crushes and gossiping. The arrival of Ankit, Diksha's elder brother's friend leads the story to a different pace. Both Ankit and Diksha start liking each other and they spent quite a bit of time together without the knowledge of either the parents or her elder brother. When the first opportunity for an overnight travel for a school project is arised, both of them jump at it. A single mistake done in her teens makes her life take a huge turn. Life after that was out of her control and all the other happenings was decided according to her parents wish. She lost the trust and the unconditional love of her parents and was treated like a murderer. Unconcerned with the thoughts of Diksha they made her to act according to their wish. She was transferred to a girl's school and was allowed only to join in the college for women. No other second chance was given to her to rectify her mistake. However, things there take a turn for the worse due to which the lives of Ankit and Diksha are forever changed. Diksha indicates this through her following words,

**“This one incident is going to change the course of my entire life. But I have no idea to what extent and, for the moment, all I feel is this huge heaviness in my heart and the horrible feeling that life as I know it is about to change forever” (Pg-61).**

Diksha attempts to get back the love and trust of her parents which ends in vain. The cruel attitude of her parents towards her reminded her of her mistake often and she dies with guilt. She yearns to prove her parents of her realization about her mistake and surrenders her wholly to the wish

of her parents. Her thrusts to prove her loyalty ends her life into the loveless life of marriage at the age of nineteen. This compelled sacrifice leaves a void and leads to dissatisfaction in her marriage life which she never expect for.

**“If my parents had asked me to walk on coals in order to win back their trust, I would gladly have (Pg-123).**

Diksha thought that marriage would bring her an escape from the restricted life of her parents and will be free from her stressful past and gives herself in marriage willingly in order to pacify her parents. But unfortunately her decision seems to be wrong where, she finds her marriage turns more regretful due to her husband’s insensitive nature. The story then drifts to the present. In Bangalore, Diksha is married to Sandeep and they have a son Abhay. Diksha’s entire day, rather, existence revolves around both of them. Right from making the morning tea, to breakfast, lunch and dinner to catering to every whim and fancy of Sandeep and Abhay, Diksha seemed to not have an individual life at all. Life has changed completely after marriage. Diksha is a timid house wife, a submissive and dependent wife who is scared of her own husband to whom she could not even express her feelings. Diksha was no more the same person who she used to be. Diksha seems to be happy and wanted to prove herself a great woman obeying her husband, and her parents but the fact is that in the process of pleasing her parents and family she has been suppressed of her own desires. Her priorities have suddenly changed. She had to think about others all the time. She can't do what she wanted to do. Sometimes she knew that something is wrong but the people around her made her feel that it was she who is always wrong. If she does her best, nobody was going to appreciate it. Diksha explains her misery as follows,

**“The pattern that a couple inadvertently sets in the early years of marriage continues even later, unless a conscious effort is made to change it. That never happened in our case. And so, to this day, he and our nine-year-old son, Abhay, eat together and leave. I always eat later. The praise has stopped though. He does not utter even one word in appreciation these days”.**

(Pg-9) After marriage, she is entrusted with new responsibilities; now she is not alone and have take care of her partner and his needs. She needed to sacrifice her personal agendas and egos for benefits of both. She does not seem to mind her daily mundane life either.

**Dikshafeels “How can I tell Vibha all this? How can I admit to her that, yes? I feeltrapped with Sandeep” (Pg-11).**

Before marriage Diksha spent a lot of time with her friends and for her personal interests. After marriage she does not have time to even think about these. She had to think only about her husband, keeping her son happy; work at home. She had no time for herself. She felt her life was empty and she was wasting her life. Diksha cries,

**“The emptiness of my life has begun to gnaw at me, eating me up from inside” (Pg-12).**

Diksha had lived her life for Sandeep, and for her son. Diksha is a timid house wife, a submissive and dependent wife who is scared of her own husband to whom she could not even express her feelings. After being a devoted mother and wife, now she finds that she don't know herself. She had forgotten what she felt about things; don't feel respected by her husband. She doesn't know what she liked, and only has a vague sense about what she doesn't like. She felt lost. Diksha explains her feelings as follows,

**“What have I done with my life?**

**Where am I headed?**

**I feel miserable and sorry as I sit there and take stock of my life. I have everything, yet I have nothing. And I have no idea what I am going to do” (16).**

Diksha and Sandeep had been together for almost fifteen years. Lately, she felt as though she was more of a maid or caretaker than his wife. She did the laundry (wash, dry, fold and hang), the dishes, the cooking, ALL of the cleaning, collect the trash, take the trash out, and take care of their son. Diksha says,

**“Other than being a wife and a mother, I truly am nothing” [pg.31]**

She didn't even wanted to take up a professional career of own and finds to be happy as a housewife. She is contented and accustomed to the life given.

**“We all must really live our lives, Diksha. We should do what makes us happy.**

**I kept pushing myself in career, as I wanted to prove that I was as good as any man” [pg.74]**

Diksha as repentance for the act of sin at her early age she fulfills her duty as a wife neglecting all her desires. When she was eighteen she has been married to Sandeep an insensitive husband who never cares for her feelings. Sandeep is totally materialistic where his focus is solely on his job and his earnings rather than his family. Sandeep is so conservative, selfish, cold and insensitive without any emotions. He doesn't even share an emotional with his own mother, wife and son. Diksha expresses her trauma and emptiness as :

**“He looks at me as though I have slapped him... He looks at me as though, I have just confessed my desire to become a strip dancer” (pg. 31).**

He has never even asked her to join for a cup of tea together and never uttered a word of appreciation which she longs for.

**“I hate my life as I dully hand over the cup of tea to Sandeep who takes it without even an acknowledgement and goes back to reading his newspaper”. [Pg.27).**

After marriage, the reality of living together striped away all the pretenses and real picture comes out. After marriage, she learned about her husband's habits, preferences and routine which was annoying or disgusting. But, she got used to them. Even though she really found it hard to adapt, she never made attempts to talk it over and let him know how she felt. She is not happy and content with the loveless life of her marriage. The stressful present takes her to the fanciful past which she cherishes forever. She was hunted between her past and the present which fetches additional difficulties in her married life.

**“I used to be a person with hopes, ambitious and a desire to life to the brim” (pg. 9).**  
Vibha explains,

**“Fact is, he never promised to make you happy, Diksha.**

**It was never about you.**

**It was always about him.**

**You were content then.**

**You agreed, knowing what you were getting into. You have made your bed, now lie in it” (29).**

Diksha compares herself with Vibha thinking,

**“She is leading the life she wants.**

**She has a job she enjoys, has good help at home, is independent and smart, everything I am not”(pg. 11).**

She has been suppressed for long and is under psychological torment which expresses the dissatisfaction and vacuum in life.

**“I want something more from my life.**

**I want to do something about it” (Pg- 16).**

**“But I do my duty as a wife” (Pg-62).**

However; a sudden event in her cousin's life seems to jolt her out of her existence. At the behest of the cousin, she decided to try and take some control over her life and makes a wishlist – a list of things which she truly wanted to do. Included in the list are items like snorkeling, getting drunk, wear a bikini and learning salsa. Vibha says,

**Is it important to you or not?**

Just a moment ago, you were complaining bitterly about having lived your life so far as per your parents' or husband's wishes. So I want you to write down what is it that YOU want on this piece of paper. Put down everything that will make YOU happy, she speaks slowly as though speaking to a child.”(76)

**“I have completely lost track of what I want.**

**I have played the role of wife and mother to perfection.**

**So much so that I have forgotten what I want as an individual. My identity is truly Sandeep’s wife or Abhay’s mother (Pg-16).**

Diksha doesn’t aware of how to get back her identity rather spending her life in serving her husband and her son. She feels that she has lost her track with passion and desire and is helpless. Diksha was caught into the traditional customary where she was made to act accordingly.

**“You do not realize when or how the easy familiarity gets replaced by a ‘taken-for-granted’ attitude over the years. But the time you do, it is often too late. Habits have been formed, patterns have been set.**

**And a comfort zone has been established. A zone that is hard to get out of” (Pg.27).**

Sandeep’s wish which includes physical outfits too. She was treated almost like a maid servant than as a wife. Sandeep never considers the needs and happiness of others even of his son. Diksha was considered as a mere object where Sandeep claims his ownership over her. Even his love making is seemed to be an act of ownership which would be so mechanical without any love for his wife. He never asks for Diksha’s wish and expectations even her longing for a weekend outing seems unfulfilled. She feels that the emptiness of her life keeps haunting and realizes that she not lived her life at all. Diksha dare not to express her desires and feelings over Sandeep. She herself admits that she longs for a better life considering the present one as the worst part of life where her needs, demands, desires, aspirations expectations, love for life and attachment seems to be unnoticed.

**“I have no idea what I want anymore.**

**What have I done with my life? Where am I headed?**

**I feel miserable and sorry as I sit there and take stock of my life. I have everything, yet I have nothing” (pg.16).**

Diksha feels being trapped within the conventional life of Sandeep where she finds no space for her individuality. Diksha longs for a life of her own building up her career and being independent with self-identity. Lack of appreciation and recognition from her husband for her work makes her to feel worthless and she thinks that she has been wasting her life all along. Life is not something to be lived according to the designs of others leaving one’s own self-respect rather it is something to be experienced with love, hope and determination. It is not about serving people under compulsion without any acknowledgement but is of identifying and exhibiting one’s own affairs of life. Sandeep being so selfish seems to prioritize his happiness than any unconcerned with the innocent desires of his own nine year old son. Diksha was never allowed to voice for her wanting. She was totally detached from

her parents and brother and the treatment of them towards her creates enormous bitterness over them. She was made to live her life as of her parent's wish which she does without any compromise where after marriage it was all about Sandeep. She feels that she has been pushed into things which are against her will. There occurs a battle between her true-self and the transformed self where she is caught under the game of desire and restrictions of tradition as **“I really am a bundle of contradictions” (pg.18)**. Sandeep was there for her neither in her happy times nor in her hard times.

Diksha is bored of the marriage life with Sandeep and she feels being trapped in the name of marriage. She has been suppressed all her desires for the sake of her parents and surrenders herself for the life she never wish for. She admits to Vibha that she is not at all happy in her married life. She was unable to live a life of her own.

It is as though I have been living in a dream all these years and, like Rip Van Winkle, have suddenly woken up. What is it that

I want? (Apart from raising my child well and keeping house).

I know I want something more from my life. I want to do something about it. But what? I really don't know (pg. 16).

The above line shows how she longs for her independent life. Her whole life seems to be void and feels that she has not lived her life at all. Her individual self seems to be destroyed and is made to act according every others wish ignoring her own.

**“It really feels you are dancing to everyone's tunes but you have forgotten to listen to the music in your own heart” (pg- 104).**

Diksha's mother-in-law is very understanding and supportive.

**“She is truly modern, my mother-in-law.**

**She is so practical and correct in her thinking.” [Pg- 81]**

She set the tone for the dynamic between both from day one, and was a source of comfort and strength as she bumbled around trying to figure out what this whole marriage/motherhood thing was all about. She is adaptable to the changes in the society and has a positive outlook. She is an understandable lady who supports and encourages her daughter-in-law when she wants to learn salsa dance.

**“You must take the qualifying exams... No knowledge is ever wasted.” [Pg-232]**

She accepts that people should change according to the changes in the society, and that it's not wise to stick to conservative thoughts. **“People have to change with changing times.” [Pg- 81]**

She has empathy for Diksha and shares her experiences and views on women freedom when Diksha voices out her fees. You know, I felt much the same way. I too got married to Sandeep's father,

way too early.

**I have never ever lived my life or done things for myself. But that was okay for women of that generation.**

**Certainly not of your generation.” [P 122]**

Right from the beginning she was not allowed to express her own feelings. Diksha and her transformation from innocent dependent dutiful wife to an independent courageous woman help her to take the right path of life of her wish.

Diksha’s mother-in-law was unhappy with the narrow mindedness of her son. She also observes detachedly, who is on the wrong side. She feels bad for her son’s curt and cold nature, his insensibility and his orthodox thoughts. She says to her grandson —

**“I wish your papa had half your sense.” [Pg- 232]**

She repents for her son’s narrow minded and selfcentric nature. **“Sadly, my son is selfish idiot. I erred in raising him.” [Pg- 120] “I really think that my son should broaden his view a little... he has dug his own grave.”[P 253, 254]**

She is the one who stands by her daughter-in-law when she wants to walk away from her son. This is a peculiar depiction of a new woman who could understand the emotions of her daughter-in-law and supports her in her decision. Her mother-in-law is adaptable to the changes in the society and has a positive outlook. This dimension is new to society and it takes us all by surprise. She accepts that people should change according to the changes in the society, and that it’s not wise to stick to conservative thoughts. She is not happy with the narrow mindedness of her son. She also observes detachedly, who is on the wrong side. She feels bad for her son’s curt and cold nature, his insensibility and his orthodox thoughts. She is the one who stands by her daughter-in-law when she wants to walk away from her son. This is a peculiar depiction of a woman who could understand the emotions of her daughter-in-law and supports her in her decision. When he comes to know about Diksha’s salsa class his act was so violent that he slaps and drags her out of the class in front of everyone of which she was humiliated of her respect. Sandeep, felt shocked and couldn’t realize what was happening. He behaved rudely to her dance partner Gaurav. Sandeep punched Gaurav on the face with his right hand. He shouted at Gaurav which made Diksha frightened. He accused Diksha for dancing with other men. For each word hurt Diksha felt like slapping on her face. Diksha claims,

**“Which century is Sandeep living in?**

**I was only dancing, something I love doing, something I am good at.**

**How can he be so narrow- minded?**

**How dare he do this?**

**Treat me like I am his personal slave” (Pg-187).**

It is this in human behavior of Sandeep made her to question him expecting the treatment of at least a human being. She was totally broken and feels defeated and vulnerable and was completely trapped in the hands of Sandeep.

**“You have always made decisions for me and you have presumed I am happy.**

**It is you who forget that a mother and a wife is also a woman and a humanbeing, just like everyone else and deserves to be treated right” (Pg-191).**

The suppression of all her desires broke out at a point where she decides to live the remaining according to her wish and starts exhibiting her wish list. It was Vibha who kindles the hidden affairs of Diksha and helps her to identify a meaning for her existence. She finds a way to be worth lived and was courageous enough to leave away the conventional life. Diksha was not even allowed to dream of her fancy world and she admits that she never experience fun in life.

By a fortuitous turn of events, Tanu (who has been working at Gurgaon and recently re-located to Bangalore) re-entered her life and told her that Ankithadwanted to get in touch with her since a long time. With this conversation, Diksha’s heart and mind were forced to confront whether she would really want to meet him; if yes, what would the future course of action be, etc. How the issue was sorted out forms the climax of the story. Diksha says,

**“Ankit truly makes my life worth living.**

**I know I want him more than anything else. But I lack the courage to say this to Sandeep.**

**I am terrified of the repercussions and I am terrified of facing his wrath”(P212).**

Finally, Diksha walks out of her marriage life to pursue her dreams and moved in with Ankit. The innocent crush had swept her life far beyond her reach and imagination. The marriage life has given her nothing rather than the loads of irritation and resentment. She then learned salsa and started her own dance studio. Her family accepted her decisions and choices in life. But, on the other side Diksha’s cousin Vibha repents for not having spent enough time with her family. So, she makes amendmends and takes the situation under her control. With this character changes PreetiShenoy clearly states that a woman can build her life and go on, be it professionally or personally. In complete contrast to Diksha, Vibha longs to spend time with her family and hence she quits the job. She finds peace in doing mundane household chores. She starts to take care of her family and enjoys life. Form this characters we can understand that woman has to know what her calling is and has to go in that direction making amendments in life. Diksha felt as a prisoner captivated behind the bars who could never express the feeling and longs to break free from the bars and fly into the world of colors. Diksha finds herself in dilemma, urged by a twist of events, a wish list is born. But a piece of wish list

helps her life back together.

The best part about Preeti's writings was the time and effort spent in etching out each and every character and the interactions between them. Diksha as a bubbly teenager; Diksha as a housewife; Diksha as a housewife wanting to live out her wishlist; Diksha as a housewife imagining what it would be to go back to Ankit – all the various stages had been carved out beautifully. Sandeep's character had been shown to be a typical, male chauvinist who only cared for his well-being without giving a thought to what his wife wanted. He cannot even imagine that she may have any wants. He came across as extremely selfish and a person quite easy to hate. Tanu had been portrayed as Diksha's best friend – someone who had her best interests at heart and who forgave her friend's faults. Ankit is the ideal guy – someone who was compassionate, caring and concerned; who wanted to fulfill each and every wish of Diksha at whatever cost it entails. He lets his heart rule his mind. The significance of the essential life-values and relationships of family and friendship based on trust and love is underscored by the novelist as she suggests that these are the very anchors on which an individual can rely in the times of distress. The story subtly suggests that it is the presence of these values that makes one's life truly fulfilling and satisfying. The relationships based on these foundations make them typically human and it is on these that the very powers of the sustenance of life depend.

**“The world is indeed a better place where there is love, friendship, acceptance and hope. Powered by these, you can indeed overcome anything, including destiny”. (Pg- 209)**

In today's society, woman play variety of significant roles from their birth till the end of life. The society expects a woman should be independent of thoughts, capable of making decisions, who is willingly able to lead others and above all who designs her life to the best. Finally, according to the society a woman should be successful in her professional life and personal life. But, Woman loves to express their individuality and so they make their own decisions to succeed. Here Preeti Shenoy through her portrayal of female characters draws the attention of the readers that in modern India women should have a career and income of their own. She has also analyzed illegitimate affiliation between Ankit and annoys her husband's as an appliance of resistance to conventions and values. She deals with the image of a female character vibha who rejoices her sexuality through her conscious desire to live a life of her own wish. Her sexuality is an arena of contentment in which she is empowered to utilize her body for herself.

### **Conclusion :**

Towards the conclusion of the above, it can be said that women in Shenoy's fiction celebrate their womanhood; they sing women's dream and speak their bodies and passion for life. All the

protagonists in the novels of Shenoy go through a transitional phase where they become unlike conventional women and want to tramp new paths. The modern woman does not find any sense of guilt in such self-sacrifice but longs for articulateness, individualism, and self-identity. Through the creation of her women characters, Shenoy had shaded the notion that a woman is never regarded as an autonomous being since she has always been assigned a subordinate and a relative position. Preeti Shenoy's novels reveal the life of women, their struggle for basic rights, the quest for identity and survival. With education, they become conscious of their self-confidence. Towards this novel women's struggle with the established norms of society and the code of conduct it imposes on its counterparts. Their focus is to probe into the inner heart and examine their emotions, passions, and feelings. Preeti Shenoy has brought an extraordinary story that tugs at the heartstrings, with insight and wisdom, as she explored the delicate matters of the heart in her novel *The Secret Wishlist*. *The Secret Wish List* is full of twist and turns. Preeti's book have this unique characterization, plot development and hidden inspiration with the real sense of Feminism that makes people love it. It's all about family, friendship, love, fears, overcoming fears and passion. It is like a roller coaster ride of feelings and emotions. It's a struggle between your responsibilities and your dreams. She also insists on women autonomy. She rightly distinguishes the need for women freedom.

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