

Preety Shenoy's '*Life is What You Make it*': A Metaphysics of Disillusioned and Dreadful Trajectory of Life

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Abstract

Among the clutch of contemporary writers, Preeti Shenoy's name is undoubtedly ranked among the top five bestselling gutsy authors. The reason of her quick fame is the choice of topics that resonate with the present mental trauma encountered by the youth of current India. Due to her familiar themes, she has become one of the most acclaimed and distinguished celebrity. Her novels, quite distinct in themes, have been making good business due to their remarkably simple yet appealing style. Her characters resonate with those whom the readers encounter in their day-to-day activities. This compatibility enables them to swing and sway with the characters and relive their lives. Her novel '*Life is What You Make it*' is well spun and rightly woven with a discrete theme- '*bipolar disorder*'. Its setting is the India of 1990s, the era when the life was not so complicated and stressed as it is now. The protagonist of the novel is Ankita Sharma, a simple girl with not so high dreams, through whom the author has depicted the ebb and flow of life. Ankita is an immature young girl in her 20s who faces a plethora of ups and downs. This condition is mainly due to her infatuation. The sojourn of her mental trauma begins with the suicide of Abhishek as she feels herself responsible for it. The guilt conscious is so strong that she experiences mental breakdown and henceforth nothing remains for her as normal as it was earlier. The swing between illusion and reality is so swift that she herself is puzzled and everything goes berserk. The paper strives to peep into the roller coaster life of the protagonist to not only purge out her fluctuating mental dilemma but also portray the contemptible trajectory of her life post suicide attempt. It also tends to highlight the fact that suicide cannot be a solution to any problem. The paper aims to fetch home the notion that with a strong grit and right medication any mental disorder can be cured. Ultimately, saving a life is what matters.

Keywords- Resonate, compatibility, spun, immature, sojourn, plethora, breakdown, dilemma.

Life is What You Make It, as the title suggests is a simple storyline with a deep impact. It is as simple and as complicated as

it can be with the life of a not so sophisticated girl who unknowingly commits mistakes that perfectly ruin her life, leaving an indelible

scar. Preeti Shenoy has proved a trend setter with her debut novel. Novel writing in English has not only undergone a sea change but has also taken a huge leap ever since the entrant of novice writers in the genre. With the advent of the neophyte the theme of the novel has also witnessed a huge change. Clinical Trauma, especially mental disorder is rampantly used as a dominant subject by the contemporary writers. There is a clutch of such writers who have created ripples into the calm ocean by their turbulent write-up providing new phase to the readers and challenging them with new topics that rip into the fabric of life. These stories, too close to the real life, directly question the readers by peering into their eyes. Preeti Shenoy, is a part of the select club of bestselling authors that includes Amish, Ravinder Singh and Durjoy Datta – those practitioners of the extremely popular genre of pop-Indian fiction. Her novel *'Life is What You Make It'* has proved a trend setter ranking her in the genre of Psycho-analytical writing.

The setting of the novel is India of 20s. The story revolves around a young, immature and highly sensitive girl Ankita Sharma who is in her twenties. She is an aspiring female who desires to venture into the forbidden arenas of life to fathom veiled secrets. She is brimming with energy and desire to drink life to its fullest. In the course of her journey, she encounters some men and befriends a few. She falls in love with three different men, Vaibhav, Abhishek and Joseph. Her mental trauma begins when

Abhishek commits suicide. She holds herself responsible for his death as it was, she who chooses education over marriage. Hence forth nothing remains same for her as her life takes a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn. The entire algorithm of her life, the arithmetic and the trigonometric, all collapsed like a fragile house of cards. Since now she had been living a blessed life of love and hate, wherein she was the guiding angel. After the revelation of her affair with Vaibhav and Abhishek the entire scenario changes, her parents get highly infuriated making the situation worst for her. Unable to cope up with the sudden change in her life she suffers from nervous breakdown and goes into the extremity of committing suicide.

The twist in the story begins when her parents indulge into her mental treatment shunting from one doctor to another. Finally, their journey ended when Dr. Madhusudan of *'National Mental Health Institute'* diagnosed that Ankita Sharma, the protagonist, was a patient of *'bipolar disorder'*. According to the NIMH,

'Bipolar disorder (formerly called manic-depressive illness or manic depression) is a mental illness that causes unusual shifts in a person's mood, energy, activity levels, and concentration' (Web). Bipolar Disorder is associated with unusual shifts in mood and the potential to carry out day-to-day activities. The treatment for bipolar disorder is a combination of therapies that include medication, ECT and psychotherapy.

Life is an uphill journey with many uncertainties. It has various twists and turns which makes the life difficult yet enchanting, like a sweet and sour dish. Life does have challenges and every individual has his or her share of it, some a few and a selected few have it in abundance. Ankita, it seems, is the chosen one to have it in heaps to her share. Psychologists have suggested different vehicles to reach a goal or to live life without giving up, such as determination, strong will etc., but nothing supersedes hope. It is hope which is the most important agency to approach problems and obstacles with a mindset and a strategy to achieve the set goal. Emily Dickinson, the English poet, in her poem entitled '*Hope is a Thing with Feathers*' has very realistically dwell on HOPE which is the ultimate source of sustenance and survival in this World full of 'fret and fumes'. She writes:

'Hope is a thing with feathers-

That perches in the soul-

And sings the tune without the words-

And never stops at all' -- (Lines 1-4)

In 1991, Charles R. Synder, a psychologist had come up with '*Hope Theory*' which stated that hope is a strong force which not only links one's past and present to the future but also sustains courage to move ahead with confidence, maintaining life's balance. It is a theory based on optimism and positivity. Today's youngsters are technically sound but they

lack patience and are highly sensitive and emotional. They easily lose hope and give up without trial. Dejection has taken a front seat and hopelessness has permanently creped in leading to an emotion which rises due to low mood, isolation, lack of motivation and lack of interest in future. It occurs mainly among individuals who continually lead a dissatisfied and stressed life. This dissatisfaction settles into their lives due to damaged relationships and frequently broken friendships. When relations don't sustain long, the hope in life dips and one becomes morose and suicidal. The novel '*Life is What You Make it*' deals with a somewhat similar theme wherein the protagonist Ankita Sharma's life is messed up due to her relationship with three men which ultimately leads to destruction.

She is just 20 but falling in love is such an emotional hook-up that it surpasses everything- age, sex, religion, caste, creed- almost everything. Adolescent is a tender age and the youngsters find it difficult to grapple with the surge of high emotions that occur due to passion. Ankita is a carefree girl full of hope and aspiration. How and when does the hope converge into hopelessness and life becomes pessimistic, is all the narrative deals with. Preeti Shenoy has deftly balanced the sway of Ankita's life from hope to disillusionment. The reader feels carried away along with the story's momentum, feeling the hurt and hiatus which Ankita experiences in her troublesome journey, from home to hospital.

Ankita is a jovial girl who is in love with Vaibhav and when he proposes her, she feels

'ecstatic' ([Shenoy, Life is, p.13](#)). From school she moves towards college life and joins St. Agnes College where she meets Abhishek who is a student of Mahaveer College and feels for him. The chemistry is so deep that they start meeting at every cultural event and thereby get closer. In the course of time, Ankita never forgets Vaibhav and always feels guilty about him as he was her first love and it was, he who had not only introduced her to love but also given her life a different meaning. Though she feels guilty of cheating Vaibhav, she enjoys the company of Abhishek. She reveals,

'My inner voice squeaked again trying to remind me to tell him about Vaibhav. But somehow at that moment, Vaibhav and everything to do about him seemed so far away. I was having such a good time that I didn't want anything to spoil it' ([P.46](#)).

Ankita, somehow, musters courage and tries to steer out of the guilt by disclosing her past relation to Abhishek but he denies accepting it, calling it farce. His love for Ankita is so deep that he can't stand anyone else in her life and wants her to be his forever. He expresses his love to her through a letter written in blood wherein he writes 'I LOVE YOU' in bold. He says, ***'I wanted you to see how sincere I was and how desperate. Gosh, you have no idea how much I love you'*** ([P.47](#)).

After completing her course, Ankita prefers doing MBA from Bombay. Abhishek tries to dissuade her and persuade

for marriage but she is too adamant to give up. Unaware of the consequence, she moves to Bombay to pursue her dream. She says,

'How could I tell him that my dreams had grown beyond the town of Cochin? They had tasted life outside. They had seen a wider world out there. I wanted a slice of that. It was mine for the asking. I could not be tied down like this. I could not commit. I could not give him my word. Heck, I could not even tell him that I loved him' ([P.76](#)).

Abhishek, unable to bear the separation, gets depressed and commits suicide. It happens in a wink, sparing her no time to react. Though she poses to keep normal but this episode affects her strongly and uproots her from within. Consequently, she becomes hyperactive and abnormal, both physically and mentally. She gets rigorous in her early morning joggings and meticulous in her studies. Insomnia grips her, indicating the beginning of bipolar disorder. At this point of her life, she is proposed by a guy named Joseph which she accepts despite the fact that she doesn't love him. Actually, she is haunted by those few words spoken by Abhishek's grandfather, ***'sneham mathram puchikaruthu'***- ***'Never belittle love'*** ([P.79](#)). He had advised her when she had called him after his suicide. The guilt conscious in her was becoming prominent with every minute that was ticking away. She was left dwindling between Vaibhav and Abhishek and was unable to surge out of the turbulent situation she was stuck in. Her condition becomes worse when her parents trace the love letters which she had secretly kept in her custody. They scold her for the

affairs, her negligence towards her studies and burn the letters in front of her. The incident comes as a shock to her and hence forth; nothing remains normal.

Now, she is a changed person who loves to inflict pain on her. She is constantly haunted by the feeling of guilt and fear and is unable to go to her college. She loses interest in everything and prefers lying on her bed deeply sunk in reverie. She also loses her ability to read and comprehend a book and even tries to commit suicide. At this juncture her parent's step in and, realizing the gravity of her illness, take her to various doctors for treatment. Initially it seemed a wild goose chase because nothing worked positively. Ultimately, they take her to National Mental Health Institute at Bangalore where she is advised to get admitted. Ankita refuses to stay and gets too violent. She loses her self-control and is administered with a sedative. It is here that she is diagnosed with a mental ailment termed as '*bipolar disorder*'- a state of mind which is symptomized by dramatic mood shifts dwindling between dual phases namely the '*manic phase*' where in the afflicted is bursting with energy and high spirits followed by '*depressive phase*' which often culminates to suicidal tendencies. Ankita is immediately put on medication and is given ECT (Electro Convulsive Therapy) to rein her negative impulses. Here Dr. Madhusudan plays a major role in instilling hope in his patient. In the words of Ankita, '*He was offering me the last vestiges of hope and I was clinging to it*

with the desperation of a drowning person' [\(P.164\)](#).

Dr. Madhusudan proved an angel for her as under his care and faith that he bestowed on her; she gained courage to survive the ordeal. Dr. Madhusudan facilitated her to regain her lost hope in order to lead a normal life. He truly cared for Ankita because his own sister had committed suicide and the family could not find a reason for her extreme step. Madhusudan was deeply shocked and it was then that he had decided to study psychiatry and help people prevent suicide attempt. He saw his sister's reflection in Ankita and suggested her to continue with her prospects even though she had dropped out of MBA. For the first time after her illness, Ankita is hopeful about her future. She expresses her happiness and safety in being there under the treatment of Dr. Madhusudan. Later she is shifted to the OT (Occupational Therapy) wing where there is a recreation room which impresses her. She says, '*OT wing seemed like a different world altogether. It did not have the feel of a hospital in the least bit*' [\(P.170\)](#). She is charmed and drawn towards the art materials and starts painting. Here she befriends Anuj and Sagar, who are also admitted in the hospital for treatment.

Dr. Madhusudan plays a pivotal role in her life. He proves a savior for her. During the psychotherapy sessions he motivates her by appreciating her writing skill and guiding her to work on it to make it more refined and perfect. He also encourages her bravery and courage to sustain life positively. He gives her his childhood books to read. Ankita faces great

difficulty in reading and comprehending them. So, Dr. Namita Deshmukh reads it for her and she jots down every bit of it on the paper to retain them in her memory. By the end of the sixth week her condition improves and she no longer needs to write down the passages to remember them. She picks up a book and reads it in a single sitting. She is utterly delighted and pleased at her improvement. Now, her overweight due to illness and stagnated lifestyle is also reduced due to her regular physical exercise. When fully cured; she feels nostalgic in leaving the hospital. A mixed feeling of joy and sorrow enwraps her and she feels difficult to bid adieu. She gifts her paintings to Dr. Madhusudan, Dr. Namita, Anuj and Sagar.

Her father tries to convince her to continue with her studies and complete MBA, her most yearning ambition. But now her ideology towards life has completely changed. She drops the idea because she fosters a broader view of life and knows what she wants from it. She chooses to take up a creative writing course. In a letter to Vaibhav, she writes in a highly philosophical tone about her opinion of life, ***‘I have realized that love and faith can indeed work miracles. I have realized that love and friendship do have a power’ (P.201)***. She celebrates life and develops a firm feeling that the festivity would last longer. She regains her lost hope and attains positivity. She sets out to turn a new leaf in her life; forgetting her past and getting over her disorders. She strives to create an aura of

her inner self and connect it with the exterior, rather she successfully tries to overcome her sufferings and divulge her trauma into the brightness of her present life. Her philosophical self has acquired the power to see through the darkness of the past and guide her towards the brightness of future; which is awaiting her with an abated breath. Life seems picturesque now.

Preeti Shenoy has, with the perfect stroke of an artist’s brush, painted the sufferings of Ankita’s Bipolar Disorder so acutely that its impact is impeccable and unmatched. Ankita’s scuffle through the disorder and her hope to kick start afresh is the hallmark of Preeti’s novel *‘Life is What You Make It’*. In an interview with Anupama Krishnakumar of Spark, Preeti explained about the choice of theme in the following words:

‘Bipolar Disorder is slowly gaining awareness in India but continues to be treated as somewhat of a taboo topic in most households. The book is based on a true story and when I first heard the story, it moved me so much that I decided it had to be written and shared with the world’ [\(Web\)](#).

Today’s life, post Covid Pandemic, lacks physical sustenance. The youngsters of today are brought up in an environment which is full of risks and threats; making them vulnerable and weak. Life is a roller coaster ride which gives us the glimpse of high as well as low, equally. In the times of distress, it is nothing but hope which proves the last straw to pull one out of the vortex. Shenoy’s story teaches us to sustain hope in every phase of life. The

author strongly puts forth that there is always a way out of the dark and dingy alley, suicide is in no way a solution to any problem. Disorder is a mental condition which can happen to anyone in this stressful life. It should not be mocked at but taken as a normal situation and dealt with clinically. Through the protagonist Ankita; the author has not only succeeded in conveying a positive note to the society but also nailed it right.

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