



UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN PREETI SHENOY'S THE RULE BREAKERS

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ABSTRACT:

Gender discrimination is the prominent issue in India which leads to the psychological and emotional trauma in women. Preeti Shenoy is an eminent female writer of the time for her significant contribution to the literature. She successfully fully depicts the life of modern Indian women in her works in a very realistic manner. Her stories seem to be the true reflection of the patriarchal Indian society which deals with the issues like gender discrimination, subjugation of women and their voices, patriarchal domination, psychological trauma and inner pain that her women characters confront. She uses very simple and illustrated language to narrate the plight of the women in India. Her novel *The Rule Breakers* (2018) beautifully tells the journey of women from various social backgrounds who experience trauma in various ways. This paper aims to analyse the psychological trauma suffered by these women namely Veda (protagonist), Kamala (Veda's mother) and Shakubai (a maid) through the textual analysis of the novel. The female characters selected for the study come from different class, social background and age group. Thus, their needs (both psychological and physical), responsibilities, and way of living are different. The purpose of the study is to determine the reactions of these women to the trauma and whether the experiences and traumas of women who belong to different social classes and age groups are same or different. The paper looks into the various dimensions of the novel from the feminist perspective and examines the suppression of women and their mental health.

Keywords: Preeti Shenoy, *The Rule Breakers*, Psychological Trauma, Feminism, Women, patriarchy, gender discrimination

“There are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds.” – Laurell K. Hamilton

The definition of trauma as given in Wikipedia: “Psychological trauma is a type of damage to the mind that occurs as a result of a distressing event. Trauma is often the result of an overwhelming amount of stress that exceeds one's ability to cope, or recurring events of being overwhelmed that can be precipitated in weeks, years, or even immediate circumstances, eventually leading to serious, long-term negative consequences.”

In the present novel the female characters suffer from the suppression and oppression in a male dominated society throughout their life which leads to psychological trauma in them and thus, it is important to examine their anguish and suffering.

According to the studies “Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse

effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2012, p. 2).

"Traumatic experience creates psychological trauma when it overwhelms one's ability to cope with the situation and own emotions, and leaves that person fearing death, annihilation, mutilation, and the cause of traumatic experience most often include abuse of power, betrayal of trust, entrapment, helplessness, pain, confusion, and loss of something or someone very important in one's life."

Preeti Shenoy is an Indian author, blogger, speaker and illustrator. She has authored fifteen full length novels till the date. Her literary contributions include the novels like *34 Bubblegums and Candies* (2008), *Life is What you Make it* (2011), *The Secret Wish List* (2012), *The One You Cannot Have* (2013), *It Happens for a Reason* (2014), *A Hundred Little Flames* (2017), *The Rule Breakers* (2018) *Wake Up, Life is Calling* (2019), *The Magic Mindset: How to Find Your Happy Place* (2021). She was awarded an Indian of the Year award by Brands Academy and also received a business excellence award. She uncovers the depth of the gender biasness in Indian patriarchal society through her stories and characters. She perfectly portrays the nuances of the issues of women of their daily life and how it affects them emotionally is the main theme of her novels. She tells the struggle stories of the women in the male dominated society by writing their sufferings then they try to cope with the situations and ultimately comes out of them and find themselves.

The novels comprise of the two other women who have same situation like Veda i.e., Veda's mother kamala and Shakubai (A maid). The three women experience the psychological trauma due to their societal pressure. The plight of women is well described through the three female characters and thus, the novel gives an insight to look into the traumatic life of 21st century Indian women through the three female characters. In an article B. Aparna writes about Preeti Shenoy: "She delves deep into the psyche of human minds and brings out the trauma faced by the subjugated people. The hierarchy of power structure elucidates the subjugation prevalent in society."

The previous studies on the novel were only confined to the analysis of the pain and suffering of the protagonist Veda. To precise the research, the present paper deals with all the female characters who has suffered through trauma and pain in the novel.

Analysis and Discussion:

The Rule Breakers is a story that tells the journey of a girl Veda from the rule follower to the rule breaker. The social setting of the novel is 1995, Joshimath and Pune (India). Veda is 18-year-old who is very sincere, obedient and silent girl, she is eldest of the five children of the family. It is a middle-class family living in a mountainous town Joshimath where Rajinder and Kamala are the parents and they have four daughters Veda, Vidya, Vaishali and Vandana and a son Animesh, youngest child of the family. The four girls face the gender discrimination from the starting of the novel and become used to it as Animesh gets all the privileges and love from the parents. The novel's narrator uses the following words to convey the ideology. "None of the girls minded that Animesh was treated differently by their parents. He was undoubtedly their favourite child" (Page no. 9) "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." (Page no. 9). When Veda, the protagonist of the novel wanted to question the different treatment of their brother, her voice was suppressed by her mother. Veda wanted to ask: "Why can't I get a job and work, Papa? Why should only Animesh have that privilege? Veda wanted to ask. But she had been taught by her mother to never talk back to her elders, especially to her father." (Page no. 9) The four girls are taught to endure all the discrimination by their mother. Which sows the seed of suffocation and suppressing one's desire in the females from the very beginning that ultimately causes the inner trauma and pain. The worst thing is that in Indian society women are taught not to speak for themselves and for their dreams by the women only.

Veda:

"She didn't want to be paraded like a display-doll for a boy's relatives." (Page no. 23)

Simone de Beauvoir about marriage said: The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. Even today, most women are, were, or plan to be married, or they suffer from not being so. Marriage is the reference

by which the single women are defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to this institution. (502)

Which proves to be very true in case of Veda. Same as Veda females are not at all allowed to take the very important decision of one's life like marriage. They have no right to decide when to, whom to and where to they will be married. Females are just obliged to follow whatever their parents decide for themselves. The girls who obediently listens to their parents without concerning their own desires are considered to be the decent by the so called patriarchal Indian society where females have no voice of their own but governed by the males. Veda feels helpless but had no option. She silently conforms and accepts all with the heavy heart. Deep down it was against her will but she has no one to share her pain with. The following lines speaks the heart of Veda about the marriage in the novel. "Like a lamb being led to the slaughter, whispered Veda, decked in her bridal jewellery." "Veda dutifully took part in all the rituals associated with the wedding, even though she found them tiresome." (Page no. 53). When she speaks out her pain in front of Suraj (her friend) she says: "I... I can't Suraj. It just doesn't work that way. I can't. I ...I am afraid of my father's wrath. Terrified, she admitted. As she spoke, tears came unannounced" (Page no. 38) Marriage about which every girl has dreams is not based on love of two persons in India. For Veda getting married is like a lamb being led to the slaughter. As she was sent to the house of her in laws in Pune. She left behind the fresh air and mountains of Joshimath and trapped in a congested flat in Pune. After marriage she never find time for her studies though her father-in-law get her admission in a college but she fails. Failing in exams deeply hurt Veda. Veda continued to undergo from the emotional trauma first caused by her father and then by her mother-in-law. She silently endures all the ill- treatment. She failed in the examinations because her mother-in-law never gave her time to study but she deliberately kept her busy doing household chores. At the time she had nothing to do Veda was asked to press the legs of her mother-in- law or to make a cup of tea for her.

Simone de Beauvoir stated that: In the solitude of the new home, tied to a man who is more or less a stranger, no longer child but a wife, and destined to become mother I turn, she feels numb; definitely removed from her mother's breast, lost in a world to which no aim calls her, abandoned in the icy present, she discovers the boredom and blandness of pure facticity. (553)

"She was filled with self-loathing and regret. What had her life turned into? All she was doing was cooking and housework." (Page no.78) "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 a gigantic burden to bear. She felt stifled, imprisoned, suppressed. She saw no escape. It was a prison she had willingly walked into. Now she was trapped. She sobbed into her pillow, feeling miserable and sorry for herself. Veda continued to sob, and when she exhausted her tears, she fell into a slumber, eyes swollen and red from crying." (Page no. 79)

And that is not the end of the story, Veda faces the climax of exploitation when she was blamed for the death of her father-in-law. Her mother-in-law openly abused her and cursed her for bringing bad luck to their family. "Veda felt as if she had been slapped. Had she really said that? Had she just called her a *kalmuhi*? (Page no.76) This was the breakdown of Veda's tolerance. She was feeling too badly imprisoned in their house. This time was the peak of psychological trauma. "I am now beginning to feel that may be its all my fault. Maybe I have been unlucky for this family" (Page no. 74) "I feel all alone. I bitterly regret getting married. I should have had the courage, Vidya. I should have spoken my mind to Papa. I don't blame anyone but myself. I wish I was stronger" (Page no. 75)

The shocking thing is that her in law's behaviour towards Veda was normal in the eyes of her parents. It was the condition when her own parents were remained silent and left her in the pain. The cursed words of her mother-in-law are: "THIS IS NOT YOUR MOTHER'S HOUSE WHERE YOU CAN DO AS YOU LIKE! She shouted, and gave veda's head a violent shake. Veda was sobbing openly now" "And don't show me your crocodile tears. They do not melt anybody." (Page no. 89)

"The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation."

In India it is considered that after marriage girl's sole responsibility is to make her in laws happy and to live for them. Margaret Waters in her book "Feminism: A very short Introduction" said that: For a married woman, her home becomes a prison- house. The house itself, as well as everything, belongs to the husband and of all fixtures the most object is his breeding machine, the wife, Married women are in fact slaves, their situation no better than that of Negroes in the West Indies. (Waters, 44)

The girl is supposed to forget her carrier goals and education. She is meant to take all the household duties and forget even about herself. "When I reminded Ma that I wanted to study further, and that I was not getting time because of my MIL, Ma said that once a girl got married, her first responsibility was towards her family." (Page no. 95) "Can you believe that, Vidya? I feel so betrayed by my own parents." "Now I am just a housewife, making rotis, tea and pressing my mother-in-law's feet. She treats me like a slave." (Page no. 92)

Veda feels more suffocated when she was unable make her husband understand that she is not okay. "I am unable to make him understand how it affects me psychologically. I wish I was not a coward, Vidya. I wish I could just walk out of this marriage." (Page no. 93). she curses her marriage as it has snatched her education from her. "I don't think we were ever given 'wings. I believe that my wings were clipped even before I learnt to fly. And I think marriage was the crutch they gave me." (Page no. 149). She advices her younger sister Vidya for not fall in the same trap she had fallen. "Do not fall into the same trap that I have fallen into, Vidya. Please study hard and start working. Marriage sucks." (Page no.72). Everything happening with Veda was oppressive and traumatic and slowly it was becoming unbearable to her. Even she had no one to share her pain with. She could do nothing but to sob in silence. "Then the dam inside her burst upon. She couldn't contain the tears anymore. She sobbed. Gut-wrenching, large sobs. It was the sound of heartbreak." (Page no. 294)

The time when Bhuwan's homosexuality was revealed to Veda's parents. They were shocked not for the betrayal of their daughter but for the failure of their daughter's marriage. They were unable to see the agony and suffering of their daughter but were worried if Veda is going to live in their house again. Veda's own father said that if you could have taken enough care of your husband, this marriage may have worked out. "If you had taken enough care of him and kept him satisfied, I don't think any of this would have happened. You should have had a child and everything would have been okay." (Page no. 315)

Simply he also blamed Veda for the things that have gone wrong. At the end Veda gather all the courage to speak after her father and she requests not to force her younger sisters to get married. She suggests her father not to clip the wings of her sisters how he clipped hers rather to give importance to education and their carrier. "Papa, I know you mean well and you want the best for your daughters, but with your other daughters, please do not make the mistake you made with me. When it came to my marriage, it was you who insisted and I didn't have the courage to refuse you or Ma. Please do not force Vidya to get married. Do not force vaish or vandhu. I had a dream not a long time ago, Papa. I wanted to be a college lecturer. I wanted to study in Delhi. You never let me go. You clipped my wings." (Page no. 315)

Kamala:

Kamala was Veda's mother. The situation of Kamala is such that she has no life of her own but lives for her husband and five children. She was subjugated by her husband at the level that now she has no interest in anything. She lives just for the sake of living. She was a 10th fail woman has no choice of her own. She was deprived of the right to choose or think what is good for her and for her own. It is that she can never cross the line her husband made for her and go with whatever her husband has said, whether it is right or wrong. This can be understood more clearly from the line below: "Their pliant mother, Kamala, just went along with whatever their father decided" (Page no. 3). Simone de Beauvoir writes that: The woman who feels affectionate for her husband will often tailor her feelings to his: she will welcome pregnancy and motherhood with joy or misery depending on whether he is proud or put upon. Sometimes a child is desired to strengthen the relationship or a marriage, and the mother 's attachment depends on the success or failure of her plans. If she feels hostility toward the husband, the situation is quite different: she can fiercely devote herself to the child, denying the father possession, or, on the other hand, hate the offspring of the detested man. (611)

Kamala got used to the life to the level that she never spoke up for herself and for her daughters. She was the mother, very well known to the desires of her daughter Veda but she never got courage to oppose what is not right. She was silently enduring frightened by her husband. She accepted all the norms of the society that are designed to keep the patriarchy alive and didn't even think of denying them. She taught her daughters also not to speak back to anyone specially to their father and tolerate everything silently. She didn't even paid attention to her diet and health. "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." (Page no. 5). Again, mothers are held responsible for their children's actions if they are not socially acceptable. "Papa shouted at Ma the other day, saying that it was her upbringing that had spoilt us girls. M started crying."

Shakubai:

Shakubai was a poor woman who worked as a maid at the house of Padma Devi and other neighbouring houses at Kailash Mandir Colony. She lives in Sitawadi, Pune with her daughter Kajol and her drunkered husband Rajaram. Shakubai's distress over her husband's abuse was intense. She was struggling and working hard to get money for her daughter's education and her husband used to spent all the money in alcohols. He used to beat her on regular basis. The opening scene at the house of Shakubai is described as: "Shakubai tried to turn on her side, laying on the straw mat spread on the floor of the tiny 10 ^10 inner room. She grimaced in pain. One of her eyes was so swollen that it was only a slit, and she could barely open it. She could feel a vein throbbing in the other one. Her head ached. Her throught was dry and every muscle in her lean body hurt. (Page no.108). The lines above show the intensity of the physical violence endured by a woman. These women have no support that can save them from the torture but by the time they get used to the life they have. "Patriarchal cultures determine gender roles that lead to the victimization of women and violence and aggressive behaviour are often accepted from men because they are congruent with the cultural script for masculinity."

There could be many cases at Sitawadi like Shakubai. The women live in slum try to earn the livelihood and still are exploited by their husbands. Rajaram was like a monster as he didn't even have the soft corner for his small daughter Kajol. He had no concern about the trauma that Kajol would have when she sees her mother beaten up in a barbaric manner. Shakubai and Kajol were so known to Rajaram that they never argued him as it would have no meaning. In such situation a woman is left with no choice but to bear the suffering of physical and psychological violence. Shenoy writes it as: "But she never spoke up. It was futile even trying to bring all this up, as he was a bitter, angry man even when he was sober. He felt the world owed him more. When he was drunk, the monster that he manged to suppress during the day, got loose. He would hurl things, shout, curse and abused till he passed out." (Page no.110) Due to the continuous violence the trauma intensifies in the psyche that the woman who was terrified and frightened earlier has threatened her husband to kill him. The time when the growing trauma explodes. Shakubai bursts on Rajaram when it comes to her daughter Kajol: "When Kajol was eight, he had yelled at her mother saying, No money? No money? Why don't you whore out that girl of yours and then get some money? That was the only time Kajol had seen her mother shout back. *Bhadwa*. You scum of the earth. You touch her and I will kill you!" (Page no. 111) It was the mother who never speak for herself even after so many violences but at the time her husband abused her daughter she couldn't stop herself. The trauma that she holding inside for a long time burst out. Rajaram had never tried to make her wife and daughter happy and never gave them a peaceful life but mourned if he could have a son. Kajol was a bright and intelligent girl but she never got the love from her father being a female. The narrated lines from the novel are: "Her husband didn't much bother about Kajol's grades. He still mourned the sons he had lost, and in his eyes, a girl child was inferior to a boy." (Page no.112)

CONCLUSION:

The psychological analysis of the female characters of the book led researchers to the conclusion that women in India in the twenty-first century do not have the best of circumstances. Regardless of their class and age, the female characters in the novel Veda, Kamala, and Shakubai all had to make compromises along the way. They had been exploited both physically and mentally. The three women characters of the novel studied react differently to the trauma according to their circumstances. Veda the Protagonist of the novel arises as a new being, who is

independent. Shakubai rebel against the odds of life and Kamala continued to live her normal life. Preeti Shenoy's novel *The Rule Breakers* gives insight to look into the psychological trauma of Indian women. Textual analysis of the novel from feminist perspective We get a sense of the circumstances and the atmosphere of many characters. The author discusses all the difficulties and issues encountered by the female character particularly those that affected the weaker sector, through a variety of characters. Indian feminism is strongly expressed in this book and is presented as the most appropriate feminist perspective for women's living in traditional Indian society.

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