



## **Men Women Relationship in Preeti Shenoy's *The One You Can not***

*Have*

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### **Abstract:**

Preeti Shenoy is a prolific modern Indian English writer. She talks about modern day issues in her novels. Apart from being a best-selling writer, she is also an artist. She does portraiture beautifully. The novel *The One You Cannot Have*(2013), is a straight from the heart modern day romance. This talks about unrequited love, of complicated entanglements and of coming to know the fact that there will always be the one you cannot have. This is interesting story telling about men women relationships. This is a story of Shruti, Aman, Anjali and Rishabh. Through these characters, Shenoy represents how people in today's world live with each other, and how long a broken heart takes to heal. Moreover, how a person forgets that one perfect relationship.

**Keywords: love relationship, mutual trust, marital dissatisfaction, happiness, emotional connect.**

Shenoy writes about modern women who frankly talk about their relationships. In *The One You Can not Have*, Shruti and Anjali who are in love relationships with Aman. Anjali writes columns for Tiara. Her questions in the column are 'what do you think a woman should do to keep a guy hooked?', 'what turns you on in a woman and what will keep you hooked?' Through the character of Anjali and her conversation with her friends Sriram, Aman and Latika, Shenoy represents a woman who is open minded, independent. She writes on such topics and even makes her friends give suggestions on the topic. Shenoy has not portrayed men and women both in stereotypical way. Below written statements by Sriram, Latika and Anjali openly display this kind of portrayal of Shenoy's men women characters in *The One You Can not Have*. Sriram replies to Anjali's question:

“In answer to your query: What do you think woman should do to keep a guy hooked?

1. Show cleavage.
2. Show some more cleavage.
3. Wear short skirts.
4. Flirt.
5. Be receptive to flirting.

That’s it – so simple. Men are so easy to please” (35)

Anjali also gets answer from Aman. He answers:

I can’t speak on behalf of the entire male population, but I think by and large what I would want in a woman is companionship. She has to be a friend first. I think sex can keep the relationship going only up to a certain extent. It is important, yes, but it is not the only thing that guys look for. I would also want her to have a kind heart and be a nice person. I would like her to be open and honest and not her feelings. I would also like her to have a great sense of humour.

Intelligence is a big attribute for me too. I don’t like women who are dumb.

I like women are confident and who are at peace with themselves. I don’t like clingy, whiny, demanding women. They come across as too needy.

A woman doesn’t have to wear revealing clothes to attract a guy and trust me, while it might get her initial attention, the relationship will continue only if the abovementioned aspects are being met. (36)

Latika also replies:

I think there has to be basic chemistry for the relationship to work. There has to be a certain wave – length match for it to develop and last.

I have been married there years now, at the end of the day, we wait to talk to each other, swap stories and laugh. It is that easy sense of camaraderie we have with each other that works in our favour.

And yes- no egos. When I am wrong, I apologies.

He does too.

We love each- other unconditionally. I think that is important. (37)

Shenoy shows what women want in a relationship and what men want from women. Shenoy represents modern women who want equal opportunities and want to lead autonomous life with least interference. Anjali is a modern woman. She herself says about relationship between man woman that a woman should not chase a man. It is clear when she writes in a mail to Aman: “Do not wallow trying to figure out why that person does not want you. Remind yourself that you are truly worth more than clinging to somebody who does not care in the same manner you do” (139).

Another important woman character is Shruti who also had been in relationship with Aman, but could not marry him due to family issues. Shruti is the protagonist through her portrayal Shenoy conveys thought process of ‘women of today’s world’. First thing what Shenoy conveys through this character is how she condemns people to pressurize a couple for having baby. This shows stereotypical mindset of Indian society about marriage that man-woman marriage each other to produce children. Everybody makes it their business. Her mother always talks this topic of procreating children with her and suggests her not to delay. According to her mother, the older Shruti will be, the harder it will become to conceive. Certain things have to be done at a certain time. Moreover, according to her, Shruti is gambling with her own health and her baby’s health. But Shruti being modern woman wants to do things according to her own plans and makes her mother understand that: “Well, Ma, do you know of Madonna the singer? She had her baby at thirty – eight. And Halle Berry- she became a mother at forty- one” (41-42).

But her mother does not stop discussing this topic again and again, and gives examples of Bollywood stars who quit their career only to have children. But Shruti being



educated girl does not want to quit her career and raise children, just because some Indian movie stars have done so. Any woman in a whirlpool of change breeds feeling of alienation, insecurity and inferiority. This woman pines for adjustment and readjustment. While facing problems and refusing to accept circumstances, she settles on living life in her own way. In this way, Shruti does.

Shruti's life goes through emotional turmoil when her mother is diagnosed with last stage cancer. Destiny throws her on a new and different path what she never envisaged before. She loves Aman, but quits this relationship and says yes to Rishabh's marriage proposal. She does this thing just to fulfil desires of her dying mother. She is not a weak, submissive woman at all, but she loves her parents too. She is also a dutiful daughter. Whenever she feels regretful for not getting married to Aman, she still can recall the relief on the faces of her parents when she finally agreed to marry Rishabh. Her mother's cancer was a rude jolt making them all stressful. After all, cancer is not easy to fight. Her mother has been very brave during this phase. Doctors discover a tumour which is twice in the size that the scan detects. So, instead of taking out just one affected lymph node, they have to take out eight infected ones. There are rounds of chemo, radiation and further investigations. A shudder passes through Shruti's body as she recalls that period of time of her life.

Shruti does not know if her relationship with Aman fell apart due to her mother's health or not. All she knows that she was in no frame of mind to fight her parents then. Her mother finally has to go in for a mastectomy. The doctors have said that it is absolutely essential to eliminate all risks and to ensure its total eradication. Shruti remembers the relief washing over her when her mother finally comes home. This is Shruti who cries. Her tears are because of her helplessness in the whole matter. Her tears are also for an end of a relationship that has meant the world to her. Her tears are for her mother's maimed body that has given birth to her, nurtured her, taken care of her. Her tears are also tears of relief that the monster that they have all been fighting is finally vanquished and her mother is cancer-free. She has survived it.

Throughout those years, Shruti has been her mother's biggest support after her father. Being a single child, this is her responsibility to make her mother feel good. Perhaps if she has siblings, they might have been there for her mother. Sometimes, she wonders if it has not

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been for her mother's cancer, she might have been married to Aman, not Rishabh. Even though, it is too late now to think about what could have been if things had been planned out differently. Thought of him still cause a storm inside her, though, outwardly she appears calm. Four years with him and she could not envisage future without him. How can she forget the time she had with him? She thinks again and again that there is nobody who can make her laugh like he did. There is nobody who has cherished her as much as he did. They were so right with each- other. She contemplates and tries to make herself understand: "Aman is history- you had a chance with him but you were too cowardly to take it. You are married now and Rishabh is a great guy. Get over him" (44).

Rishabh is a nice -looking man. Moreover, he earns well and has the coveted IIM tag which automatically elevates him in the good catch category when it comes to match making. He is helpful around the house and is a great guy. "But he is not Aman" (44), her conscience says to herself again and again. There is a turmoil of thoughts inside her head. Shruti winces at her own thoughts. She feels like a traitor to be even thinking of Aman nearly two years into her marriage. Things change after marriage and a person forgets the life what he has before he gets married. But now, when Shruti contemplates about this, she finds that it is very difficult for her to forget Aman. Marriage does not change anyone's memories. Marriage does not take away anyone's past. At best, it paints a rosy picture of a 'new life'. But Shruti asks a question to herself that "Can a new life be built on the foundations of a past soaked in unforgettable memories?" (44)

Earlier also Indian English women writers depicted marriage as main institution in Indian society where girls were not given freedom even to choose their life partners. They had been manipulated in the name of family's reputation. And if someone went against parents, family and society she was socially outcasted. Marriage is considered sacred in society and in human beings' life. V. V. Prakasha Rao and V Nandini Rao says in *Marriage, The Family and Women in India*: "Marriage is considered as a ritual and sacramental union. Marriage is an indispensable event of Hindu life and the person who is unmarried is considered unholy" (14).

Anita Desai, one among prominent Indian English women writers, uses the metaphor of silence to depict resistance against gender discrimination. According to her, women lead

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marginal lives in patriarchal society. And this silence is strange trait of their social upbringing and it is a burning fact that the women in her novels experience suppression of desires, and they lead a life of solitude and neglect. The Indian women were always considered as an example of silence, withdrawal and regression but Indian society having multicultural structure with the coming of the British affected the psyche of the Indian women while she silently does the task of defining herself as against the Indian social structure, and moreover, the women in Desai's novels were preparing themselves silently for the onset the new age. Her novels narrate this predicament through the progress that is gradual process beginning from negativity to positivity. She portrays the woman in all her roles- as a mother, a daughter, a wife, a sister in male dominated society. Maya in *Cry, The Peacock* (1963) is an oversensitive, obsessive young girl married to Gautam, a lawyer. She leads a lonely life, and is apprehensive of death because once an astrologer had predicted that in the fourth year of her marriage either she or her husband would die. She does not share the anxiety with her husband, suffers in silence and becomes neurotic. She becomes submissive, patient, tolerant, compromising, traditional and understanding wife that Gautam wanted her to become. But she failed and became easy prey to silence and depression. Gautam, her husband instead of understanding her, concludes that she is mentally ill. Contrarily, Shenoy depicts Shruti in *The One You Can not Have* as someone who has arguments about stereotypical pattern of society pertaining to women's living. She thinks about her conversation with her mother and her questions about having a child. She thinks why in Indian society people put this huge pressure on their children to produce baby soon after their marriage? She wonders at what joy elders get in watching their adult married child pregnant. How they can interfere so unhesitatingly. Even the lady living in the flat opposite Shruti's flat. To whom Shruti barely speaks but for cursory greetings when they run into each other in the lobby while waiting for the elevator had asked the other day, "Beti- any good news? The 'good news' being a euphemism for being pregnant" (45). Then Shruti answers her pretending to not understand what she had hinted at, "Yes, aunty, I am getting promotion at work". Then that lady replies instantly, "Uffo- I didn't mean that". Shruti says with smile now, "I know" (ibid).

Her mother- in- law is not so easily fobbed off though. She has also started dropping not so subtle hints on the phone. She talks about longing to hold a grandchild. She also talks

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about how much a baby cements a marriage and how a family completes only when it has two children. It is annoying to listen to her for Shruti. She nods politely whenever her mother-in-law calls and responds in monosyllables. She can not be rude even though. She wants to bang down the phone and tell her to keep her nose out of her business and that Rishabh and she will decide when it is time to have a child. But the problem is that Rishabh is too eager and she is not ready. She says: “Heck- I am only twenty- six. I want to wait a few more years. I do not want to have a child now. I want to have a child when I am ready- not because my parents and my in- laws and my husband want it. I may not be certain about too many things in my life, but this is something I am certain about” (ibid).

When she discusses it with her friend Asha, she also suggests her that: “It is our life, we have to make our choice” (ibid). Shruti agrees with her and says: “I have made my choices. Walking away from Aman, the one true love of my life, and marrying Rishabh, my parents’ choice. It was hard but I have done it. My mother is free of cancer. I have a career which has just taken off and I am doing reasonably well in my job” (46). Rishabh once convinces her: “Shruti- I promise, I will do everything for the baby. I will change the diapers, I will wake up at night, I will sing lullabies. Seriously I will. I will be a very involved father” (55- 56).

But Shruti is very upset at how he goes on and on about it. How can he not see how strongly she feels about this? She does not want to have a baby because his parents are in their sixties. To have a baby, one must be ready to give unconditional love. According to her, a baby must happen because the two people want the same thing, not because one feels forced. One must be selfless enough to put another human being first. She knows from her friends how demanding children can be. She certainly is not prepared for motherhood. She answers her husband suggest him doing one thing: “Grow a pair of breasts, get a uterus, fuck yourself and go produce your own goddamn baby” (56). She says it coldly as she yanks her hand back and stands up, pushing back her chair which makes a grating sound against floor. People in the restaurant have turned towards their table and look at them. She picks up her handbag and quietly walks out, even stunned Rishabh stares at her not knowing what to do. Shruti is angry. In fact, she is too angry to care about what he says. She is too angry to give a fuck about what people think and what people say. She is too angry with Rishabh, his parents,

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her mother and the great Indian society: “Like a woman is worth something only if she gets married and produces a baby. Like her thoughts and her wishes don’t matter. Like it is this whole damn concept of motherhood which makes a woman complete” (56-57).

Shruti marches out and walks. She is shaking with rage. She just wants to get away from Rishabh. She looks for a cab or an auto- rikshaw, but she does not get. This topic of “have a child, have a child” (57) has been going on for so long now and she has reached at breaking point. She had been relieved when he had not mentioned it for the past two weeks. She was sure about that he had started seeing her point of view. But this was her game plan all along. To lie low till she ‘cooled off’, so he could bring it up again. She remembers the last time after they had sex, he said: “You know what I should do, I should throw away your birth control pills. Then you will have no choice” (ibid). She was stunned at the callousness of his remark. For a few seconds, she had been unable to speak. She had been so hurt. The look on her face perhaps betrayed her and then Rishabh converted it into a joke. “Hey, relax. Just kidding” (ibid), he said. But it was not a joke for her. He also knew it that it was a topic she felt irritated to listen to. Moreover, she was very serious about it. How could he make a casual remark like that? “Throw away the birth control pills” (ibid). Dr. Murli Manohar also conveys married women’s helplessness when they even can not take their own decisions in *Indian English Women’s Fiction: A Study of Marriage, Career and Divorce* (2018):

Whether they should continue their career/job is determined by the bridegroom or the in – law’s. If the women are consulted then this problem does not arise, of course, of late some of the bridegrooms or in – laws want women to be employed so that the income of the family may increase. If the women are not consulted and do not have a role in the decision making, then problems will arise. Women feel that questions of career should be left to them. (xiii)

Jasbir Jain also makes a very interesting point about marriage and the way the literary and media project this institution:

Marriage, home, the claims of the family are traditional goals set for the female child. It is only by examining and exploring the restrictive aspects of this value system that any change can be affected. Formal education does not equip women for this kind of



self or social analysis – but literary and media projection are likely to be of greater relevance (69).

Another women character in this novel is Latika who is so blatant that she even does not mind having an extra marital affair. She is the mother of two daughters. But she approaches Aman for extra- marital affair. She says to Aman when he shows his reluctance: “Come on, Aman. Don’t tell me you don’t want me. Vikram doesn’t have to know everything, you know, and it is not that I intend leaving him or anything” (96). When Aman warns her that she is a married woman and mother to two lovely girls. He tries to make her feel guilty. But she says him not to behave such a holier- than- thou and also not to act as if he has done nothing like this before. She says: ““What it with “motherhood”? Mothers are women too you know. Women do like to feel attractive. And, trust me, after becoming a mother, you need validation all the more” (ibid).

Preeti Shenoy, through characterization of Latika, shows that women are not only docile, tradition bound, loyal to their partners, but also frank in even expressing their sexual desires to other men. Latika has a wonderful husband, but she wants a sexual relationship with Aman free from all responsibilities just for pleasure. Latika has been portrayed as someone nonchalant, very attractive and tricky woman. Aman becomes so fearful knowing her intentions that he starts avoiding her, and abruptly stops visiting her home. On the other hand, Shenoy portrays Shruti as a woman who is in dilemma. She loved Aman immensely, but married to Rishabh out of circumstances. She feels tormented within this marriage. She feels confused. She even once contemplates: “Do I? Is it possible to love two people at the same time? I do have a special place in my heart for Aman. But I love Rishabh. Or is that what I have conditioned myself to believe? What is love? These questions go round and round in my head” (116).

Another character named Asha also talks about marital dissatisfaction. She stresses on the need to have a friend to share with or confide in. Sometime in marriage, a person does not get happiness. At that time, if he or she has her ex -boyfriend or girlfriend as a friend. It is not wrong according to her. She is in touch with her ex- lover. She expresses her feelings and remarks about marriage: “Being married – it’s a bitch. At least we can make it comfortable by having good friends who are supportive and, as far as I am concerned, I am glad I have

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Navin. That is his name by the way.... And when she says it, her eyes light up. She looks happy. Light. Different. As though she has no more worries in the world” (144). Now, Shruti figures it out that Asha is talking about the guy she broke up with, but now he is her good friend. Asha also remarks:

Don't look at me like that, Shruti, it is okay. After all, I do everything for my husband as well as my son. I also look after his mother, to boot. I deserve some happiness, something exclusively for myself. Navin and I are very discreet about it. We will never have a physical relationship. But emotionally we feel the connect- with each-other. In fact, I often tell him that he is the glue in my marriage. But for him, my marriage would have fallen apart long back. He gives me a man's perspective and because of Navin, I am able to understand Gaurav better. (144)

It is not an exaggeration to say that Shenoy's women protagonists turn to themselves for making their place in the male dominated society. They create their own destiny. Assuming new roles or new attitudes towards life, they break the mental barriers which they had built around themselves at the initial stage. However, these transitory retreats help them to fight against opposite circumstances. Their visionary zeal illuminated the tough paths chosen by them and made them successful. One thing common to all these women is intellectual ability and power of decision making. They never waver from their paths. And time has witnessed their journey from struggle to empowerment. Shenoy's women characters, specially, in *The One You Can not Have*, lead their life according to their own choice. Shruti marries Rishabh, it is her decision. Rishabh wants to have a baby with Shruti, but she is not convinced. She denied to take decision regarding this hurriedly. Somehow, Rishabh feels helpless in their relationship. Though he is a conservative man, but he could not control his wife. Anjali, Aman's mother, Latika, Asha all take their own decisions. Latika, mother of two children and happily married, does not mind to have extra- marital affair with Aman. And this is not Aman who approaches her for having an extra- marital affair. In fact, this is Latika who approaches him. To conclude, Shenoy has delineated her men women with unique colours by going away the set mould of patriarchy.



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