

**LIFE AS YOU MAKE IT: THE REAFFIRMATION OF
LIFE VALUES
(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SHENOY'S *LIFE IS WHAT YOU
MAKE IT*)**

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Abstract

In the contemporary scenario, one sadly perceives a waning of values of hope, courage, perseverance, belief and faith from the modern generation that claims itself to be technically and technologically progressive and practical in its approach. In such a scenario, there exists a dire need of a reaffirmation of the lost belief of individuals in the cultural values, ethos and the relationships that are the very essence of a meaningful and blissful life and that make life enriching and progressive in true sense of the terms. As society and literature undeniably share a relationship of being complementary as well as supplementary to each other, it remains the solemn duty of an author to take up the herculean task of contributing towards the creation of a body of literature that may serve the purpose.

The paper aims to analyse a bestselling novel of a contemporary Indian author Preeti Shenoy entitled *Life is What You Make It* (2011) as one that emphasizes the significance of human relationships based on mutual trust, understanding, care, love and affection in making life worth living and in being the anchors of a successfully charted destiny. Adorned with all these values, an individual can conquer any and every thing that he aspires of, including his or her own destiny.

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The age that we live in is proudly considered by us as one of the most progressive of the times. We take pride in tagging our times as modern, advanced, developed and virtually the best that has ever been experienced. The speakers, thinkers, philosophers and other luminaries of today seem to praise the age for its materialist accomplishments and the varied aspects of growth and development in a unanimous self-congratulatory mode. But there also exists another side of the coin. The age that we so fondly cherish is also tinted with the dark and gloomy shades of sadistic happenings and occurrences that seem to mar the very splendour and the elegance of this developmental strand. In the contemporary scenario, one sadly perceives a waning of values of hope, courage, perseverance, belief and faith from the modern generation that claims itself to be technically and technologically progressive and practical in its approach. This generation, in all

the practicality of its approach seems to be lacking behind in the strength to cope up with the pressures that today's hectic and frenzied lifestyle brings about with it. The scenario thus involves an ambiguity where it is impossible for one to decide whether to hail the profits or mourn the incumbent losses involved therein.

Literature seems to be an apt response to the aforementioned dilemma, as beside a delineation of the same, it also strives to provide a suggestion, rather a possible solution to the existing issues experienced by the humanity in general and it would be no overestimation to assert that it can never fail to function as a guide, a torchbearer and a solution to these.

Society and literature undeniably share a relationship of being complementary as well as supplementary to each other. At any given point of time, the society and the literature existing therein can be considered as complementary to each other. Being a faithful corollary of culture, Literature can be seen as possessing the elements that, beside their capability of faithfully representing the inherent and apparent cultural traits, also hold the capability of providing an antidote to the supposed lacunae existing in the society. If on one hand society influences the literature through the then existing norms, trends, manners and values, literature also functions to reinforce a current of ideas into society through the minds and hearts of the readers and herein it supplements the intellectual fabric of the society. An author, like any other individual is very much a part of society, but what distinguishes him as an author is the faculty of keen observation of the phenomena occurring around him. He takes up an issue that strikes his sensibility and that he feels should be communicated to others in order to convey a set of values or a vision. One of the major motives behind such a communication is a strong urge to shatter the stereotypical notions and the flawed set of opinions that he perceives to be existing in his surroundings. A writer, rather than being an ivory tower author composing in complete detachment to society, tries to portray reality viewing it through the lens of keen observation and objectivity. Being composed in this manner, his work consists of his heartfelt musings over the contemporary issues that seem to challenge humanity in general and individuals in particular. A modern writer is no exception to the same.

In its literal connotation, the term modern refers to something current, novel, recent and in stark opposition to antiquity. In literary usage however, the term is implied to doubts for the established modes of tradition and is also suggestive of a sense of scepticism and disbelief on the orders based on religion and culture. Such a disbelief and distance from the anchors of life function to create a void in the lives of individuals. This void result in an inability to cope up with extreme pressures inflicted by the hectic and competitive forces and consequently leads to psychological disturbances and imbalances. These can be considered as the very root cause of fatal tendencies as murders, honour-killings and suicides. One daily comes across numerous reports dealing with such acts and wonders whether the values as patience, courage and perseverance have really vanished from the ethical framework of the modern generation. Amidst such negative forces, there exists a need for Literature that reaffirms the lost hope and belief of individuals in their lives and one that can convince them that life, although with several ups and downs, pleasures and pains, is still worth living, and an author, due to his aforementioned keen faculty and his expressive powers can be considered as one who could restore these values.

Preeti Shenoy, an Indian author based in Bangalore, is one such author who emphasizes the importance of values as love, trust and relationships along with that of faith and courage of an individual in making one's life enriching and worth living for. An author of four consecutive bestselling works, Shenoy is well known in the literary arena as an active social commentator affiliated in past to magazines and dailies as Reader's Digest and The Times of India; she is an

avid blogger and has also featured in the Forbes India celebrity list. Her novel *Life is What You Make It: a story of love, hope and how determination can overcome even destiny* (2011) seems more inclined towards the existential values, the incorporation of which is much required for shearing the nihilistic tendencies that have crept in today's youth. Existentialism, as defined by Jean Paul Sartre is a doctrine that advocates the primacy of humane faculty over the concept of a predestined life. A human, as described in the doctrine is:

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself...man first of all is the being who hurls himself toward a future and who is conscious of imagining himself as being in the future...man is responsible for what he is. (Sartre 3-4)

The novel is based on a true life story of a girl who suffered a mental malady named Bipolar Disorder and how she combatted it to resume to her normal life. Besides, the story also delineates the significance of the values that are much required for sketching one's own destiny despite the upheavals that life brings about in its course. In Shenoy's words:

...it is a story of courage, determination and growing up. It is also about how life can take a totally different path from what is planned, and yet how one can make a success out of it. It is a story of faith, belief and perseverance too and charting your own destiny. (205)

The protagonist, Ankita Sharma has all the possible accomplishments that a young girl in her twenties can dream of. Blessed with captivating looks, smart and charming personality and talented disposition, Ankita seems to have been bestowed with all the possible blessings. Her life seems to blossom at its fullest. With *tonnes of friends and boys swooning over her*, she seems to have the world at her feet. Owing to her skills and talents, she is elected to the college's office bearers group and also represents her college along with her team at an inter-collegiate competition. She seems to have a complete control over her life, her career and professional choices and thus her destiny. Strongly determined to join a premiere management institute, she leaves her undergraduate college which she viewed as having limited opportunities. At her new college too she excels in her academic performance and grows too competitive and bubbling with enormous energy. At the very moment when her life was at its peak, an unexpected turn of events strike to turn it all topsy turvy.

As she belongs to a conservative family where even friendship with boys is not considered acceptable on the part of girls, she has always concealed the letters of her most important friend and childhood crush and also the letters of a boy who tries to woo her from her parents. Worse still, the latter of these boys has actually written a letter in blood and has also committed suicide after she decided to leave her undergraduate college. The letters are discovered by them, and in a typical reaction, they burn the letters in front of her and she is further warned to forget the whole incident.

This serves to catapult the U-turn of her life; she gradually starts feeling depressed and also ceases to attend her college. In her anxiety-ridden state, she passes sleepless nights and in the worst of her fits, she attempts suicide twice. She is diagnosed with a mental ailment medically termed as Bipolar Disorder, a state of mind which is symptomized by dramatic mood shifts which dwindles between two phases namely the manic phase where the afflicted is bursting with energy and high spirits followed by depressive phase which often culminates to suicidal tendencies. Her deteriorating condition becomes a grave concern for her parents and they try to get her treated at any cost. She is admitted to the mental hospital and her grief, gloom

and anxiety knows no limit once she is admitted there. Her life at this juncture seemed to be slipping out of her control because of the cruel plans of her destiny.

But she finds considerable support in the doctor who deals with her case. She is sympathetically told by the doctor that she is affected by a very interesting state of mind that is very much common with sensitive and talented personalities. The soothing words of the doctor serve to relieve her anxiety to an extent:

Creativity is closely associated with bipolar disorder. This condition is unique. Many famous historical figures and artists have had this. Yet they have led a full life and contributed so much to the society and world at large. See, you have a gift. People with bipolar disorder are very very sensitive... They are able to experience emotions in a very deep and intense way. It gives them a very different perspective of the world. It is not that they lose touch with reality. But the feelings of extreme intensity are manifested in creating things. They pour their emotions into either writing or whatever field they have chosen. (Shenoy 181)

The regular rounds of counselling that she had with the doctor and his team along with her disciplined lifestyle including reading sessions, yoga and other outdoor activities teamed up with medication enabled her to regain her lost faith and trust in her abilities. She began working on her painting skills that she used to be good at previously. In the course of six months there at the institute, she also befriended a couple of co-patients and developed a sort of bond with them based on mutual trust, support, compassion and understanding. Within six months, she seemed to emerge from her bleak past in a completely transformed manner. The counselling and the warm support that she receives from the people at the institute help her to redefine herself and to grow up in terms of relationships, beliefs and values. Through all that she undergoes she learns that life is not to be taken as granted but is to be cherished as the most precious attribute bestowed to one. She grows up in relation to her understanding of values inherent in making a life truly worth living and also in her ability to comprehend the beauty and charm of life when it abounds in love, care and affection of and for the loved ones. She remarks that from the time onwards she would never belittle love from whichever source it comes, and try to be more sympathetic towards the feelings and emotions of those at the giving end. She learns the importance of sharing and caring for others.

If you do not laugh for a day, if you have not made somebody's day happier, if you've not appreciated something good that has happened to you and if you have not felt thankful to be alive, then you have wasted that day of your life on earth!(Shenoy 201)

The epilogue at the end of the novel traces the life of Ankita eighteen years later, and shows her to have earned six more degrees and still in quest for more knowledge, happily married and to have excelled in her talent of portraiture.

Through the traumatic experience that Ankita undergoes and the way she combats it all lends a positivity of approach on the part of the author towards such a grave ailment. This positivity serves as an eye-opener to all those who in fits of frustration or depression stoop to the fatal tendencies as suicide or take recourse to other methods as drugs and addictions of the like. The novelist has simply stated that real life follows much different course than one has planned it to. Although the twists and turns of life have to be accepted, the power to carve out the best possible out of it lays in the hands of the individual. A modern novelist dealing with the contemporary scenario depicts the reality underlying the situations one encounters in life; this

reality is very different from what one dreams or imagines of. Rather than being a writer enclosed in one's own ivory tower, a modern novelist like Shenoy undertakes the tough task of portraying reality as it is and depicting the true potential and ability of a realist character amid seemingly realist circumstances.

Inspired by the real life Ankita, Shenoy portrays a character who has had the best possible accomplishments along with the worst possible experiences, but instead of sitting back and accepting all that destiny had to offer, this courageous character through her single mindedness and her urge resists the shattering blows of life and finally emerges as triumphant. The story highlights the belief of the author that although life is as it has been ordained yet it is the potential of the individual through which he can shape his own destiny. The story strongly falsifies Hardy's concept of *character is Destiny*, proving that an individual, harnessed with all the substantial values as those of belief, trust, love and hope, is capable of moulding his own destiny, thereby proving that *Character is destiny*.

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. (Shenoy 209)

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