



RESEARCH ARTICLE

UNRAVELLING ANKITA'S JOURNEY: REALISM AS THE GUIDING THREAD IN PREETI SHENOY'S "LIFE IS WHAT YOU MAKE IT"

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received 11th December, 2023

Received in revised form

26th January, 2024

Accepted 04th February, 2024

Published online 29th March, 2024

Keywords

Realism, Suppression, Depression, Love, Bipolar Disorder, Philosophy, Destiny.

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ABSTRACT

From its early beginnings during British control, Indian writing in English has developed into a rich literary heritage with notable contributions from various writers. One of the main factors in the globalization of Indian literature was the translation of works written in the indigenous language into English. The English language acquired popularity in India despite being a foreign language, serving to express social and cultural concepts. The development of Indian literature from its early exposure to Western novelistic traditions to its current unique voice as a symbol of Indian civilization. Women and literature have a tight relationship, as seen by the notable contributions made by female writers. Contemporary Indian novelist Preeti Shenoy is well-known for her best-selling books. Researchers examine Shenoy's distinct outlook on life, shaped by her wide range of encounters. Analysis of her best-known piece, *Life is What You Make It*, focuses on its philosophical ideas of willpower and resiliency. The researcher uses realism as a theoretical framework to explore the emotional aspects of people dealing with mental health issues. In contrast to romanticism, realism captures the essence of truth more like photography than art can, showing life as it truly is. The study focuses on the main character of Shenoy's novel, analyzing how society views mental health and providing an explanation for the character Ankita's behaviour. The primary insight is that, much like a roller coaster, life requires careful navigation that emphasizes the possibility of recovery while also admitting the challenges. The study uses literary realism to authentically portray the protagonist's journey and provide a story that moves from tragedy to optimism. The final message reminds readers that life is fleeting and exhorts them to follow their passions and aspirations.

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Citation: E G Jithin Jenner and Dr A Noble Jebakumar. 2024. "Unravelling ankita's journey: realism as the guiding thread in preeti shenoy's "Life is What You Make It"", International Journal of Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Research, 11, (03), 9607-9610.

INTRODUCTION

Life is What You Make It by Preeti Shenoy is a compelling fictional narrative that has garnered recognition as a must-read for readers of all ages. The author's lucid writing style contributes to the novel's success, presenting the rollercoaster life of the protagonist, Ankita Sharma. The story unfolds through Ankita's first-person perspective, offering an intimate and personal connection with the character. The narrative commences with Ankita finding herself in a mental asylum, creating a gripping opening scene that immediately captures the reader's attention. The novel skillfully incorporates a well-crafted flashback, delving into Ankita's university life, a phase relatable to many. The novel's strength lies in its ability to weave a tale that resonates with universal themes of ambition, challenges, and the unpredictability of life. As Ankita's journey unfolds, readers are drawn into a narrative that explores the complexities of human emotions and the impact of life's twists and turns on an individual's psyche.

Through the lens of Ankita's experiences, Shenoy addresses profound themes such as resilience, self-discovery, and the choices that shape one's destiny. *Life is What You Make It* stands out not only for its engaging storytelling but also for the underlying philosophical messages that encourage readers to reflect on the power of choices and the potential for transformation. Shenoy's novel is a testament to the enduring appeal of literature that speaks to the human condition, offering both entertainment and profound insights into the resilience of the human spirit. The novel unfolds Ankita's journey from a young and enthusiastic university student, securing a position in a prestigious business administration school for her Master's degree, to her admission into a mental health rest home six months later. The central mystery revolves around why and how Ankita's life takes such a drastic turn, keeping readers engaged and curious throughout the narrative. The abrupt shift in Ankita's life, transitioning from academic success to mental health challenges, becomes a focal point that the fictional work addresses. The narrative skillfully weaves together the threads of Ankita's experiences, exploring the factors that

led to her admission into a mental health facility. This exploration encompasses not only the external challenges Ankita faces but also delves into the internal struggles and emotional complexities that contribute to her mental health crisis. Despite the initial sense of abruptness, the novel employs a narrative strategy that leads to a rewarding and uplifting conclusion, commonly referred to as a 'happy conclusion.' This resolution provides a satisfying closure to the story, reconciling the challenges Ankita faces and offering a positive outlook on life. The narrative not only entertains but also prompts reflection, encouraging readers to contemplate the true essence of life. The novel's thematic exploration goes beyond materialistic pursuits, emphasizing that life is not solely about wealth, jewellery, and luxurious possessions. Instead, it invites readers to find joy in simple and meaningful experiences, such as appreciating the beauty of a flower, reconnecting with old friends, or relishing the thrill of walking in the rain. By projecting life in a different light, the novel inspires a shift in perspective, prompting individuals to reconsider their priorities and approach to life. In essence, *Life is What You Make It* delivers a powerful message that resonates beyond the confines of fiction. It encourages readers to recognize the agency they have in shaping their lives, emphasizing that life's true essence lies in the choices one makes and the ability to find joy in both ordinary and extraordinary moments. The novel becomes a catalyst for introspection, prompting individuals to live their lives with a renewed sense of purpose and appreciation for the diverse facets of human experience. Life, as portrayed in the novel, becomes a canvas where individuals can actively contribute to the creation of their narratives, embodying the idea that life is indeed what one makes it.

The novel is structured into three parts, providing a comprehensive narrative of the protagonist Ankita's life. The delineation into these segments aids in the analysis of the work of fiction. The initial eighteen chapters involve Ankita narrating her past experiences, divided into three distinct phases. The first part, spanning from the first to the ninth chapter, revolves around Ankita's graduation day in Cochin. This section likely explores her early life, setting the foundation for the unfolding story. Readers gain insights into Ankita's character, aspirations, and the events that shape her perspective on life during this phase. The second part, comprising chapters ten to seventeen, shifts the focus to Ankita's MBA studies in Bombay. This segment delves into her academic pursuits, relationships, and challenges within the competitive environment of business administration studies. The narrative may capture Ankita's intellectual and emotional growth during her pursuit of higher education. The third and final part, from the eighteenth to the twenty-third chapter, centres around Ankita's life at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and her subsequent journey towards recovery. This section likely explores Ankita's struggles with mental health, her experiences at the institute, and the resilient path she embarks on to regain control of her life. The prologue of the novel introduces the reader to Ankita's initial state in a mental asylum. Here, Ankita experiences a profound sense of despair and disconnection, feeling unable to help herself and grappling with feelings of irritation. The doctor's questioning elicits a sense of entrapment and weariness, prompting Ankita to start answering. The researcher utilizes incidents and dialogues from the novel, especially in the first part, to illustrate the application of the literary theory of realism. Realism, as a literary approach, emphasizes depicting life as it truly is, often exploring cause-and-effect relationships and showcasing events as a response to past actions or circumstances. The narrative's reliance on realistic portrayals enables the researcher to analyze the novel's adherence to this literary theory, highlighting how events unfold as a result of plausible cause-and-effect connections within Ankita's life.

Realistic Portrayal of Ankita's Life

The opening of the novel sets the stage for a complex series of events in Ankita's life, revolving around her relationship with Vaibhav. The first division of the narrative unfolds with Ankita's participation in the college elections, where she emerges victorious as the Secretary of the Arts Club at St. Agnes. This achievement grants her the opportunity to lead her college team in inter-collegiate competitions. During one

such inter-collegiate fest, Ankita encounters Abhishek, the General Secretary of Mahaveer College Union. Abhishek develops feelings for Ankita, and in her company, Ankita experiences a mix of comfort, affection, and concern. Despite Abhishek expressing his love through letters and gestures, Ankita, committed to her relationship with Vaibhav, refrains from reciprocating. Abhi's intense expressions, including a letter written in his own blood, leave Ankita bewildered and questioning his sanity. As Ankita grapples with Abhi's emotions, her love for Vaibhav begins to wane. Ankita focused on her goal of clearing the entrance test for a prestigious management institute in Bombay (Mumbai) to pursue her MBA, distances herself from Vaibhav. The dynamics of their relationship transform, and Ankita finds herself spending more time with Abhi. Despite a moment of intimacy, Ankita experiences guilt, recognizing the complexities of her emotions and actions. Abhi's persistent devotion is evident when he expresses his willingness to wait a lifetime for Ankita. The emotional turmoil, conflicting loyalties, and the evolving dynamics between Ankita, Vaibhav, and Abhi form a central plotline that adds complexity to the narrative. Preeti Shenoy crafts a story that navigates the intricacies of love, loyalty, and personal growth, inviting readers to explore the nuances of Ankita's journey and the impact of pivotal relationships on her life.

When Bombay [Mumbai] called, she was ready to take off. However, Abhishek is deeply affected by it, and his warm sadness leads him to die. In this instance, the other character's repression was well depicted. Ankita is the one who caused Abhi's death, and she merely feels bad for him. Abhi was such an emotional fool, in her opinion. Enrolling in business school was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. She doesn't want to let love get in the way of that chance. However, their initial kiss left a mark on her subconscious that didn't surface for a few months. Abhi's deep love for Ankita caused him to experience severe depression. Abhi tries suicide after she decides to part ways with him since she can't handle the truth. "My heart beats pounding away like an overworked pump," Ankita said in describing this pain (Shenoy 78). The novel quotes Swami Vivekananda as saying, "We are what our thoughts have made us. So, take care of what you think. Thoughts live. They travel far" (Shenoy 36). This statement encapsulates the philosophical viewpoint that can be taken away from this section. The inclusion of Abhishek's quoting lines "never to belittle love, no matter where it came from" (Shenoy 79) expressing his enduring love and his grandpa's advice to Ankita to value love, regardless of its origin, adds depth to the narrative. These elements contribute to the interconnected web of incidents in Ankita's life, highlighting the complex emotional landscape depicted in the novel. The reference to Abhishek's sincere and patient love, coupled with his grandpa's wisdom, foreshadows the enduring impact that relationships and sentiments will have on Ankita's journey. This is a result of a series of incidents and thoughts that she passed through at that time. One can see that all these incidents are interlinked and so it all comes under the theory of realism.

Mumbai offers Ankita a fresh start, evoking a sense of untapped potential within her. While she is inherently pragmatic and guides her life based on her convictions, as she ascends to greater intellectual heights, her inner voice becomes increasingly loud concerning her feelings about Abhishek and Vaibhav. Gradually, these opinions transform into a guilt-laden emotional burden, eventually leading to a mental breakdown. Her emotions become highly sensitive, and how she articulates her feelings becomes distinctly unusual. An unnamed fear ensnares her, causing a reduction in her sleeping hours. This emotional upheaval intensifies into a colossal wave, submerging her completely. Despite shedding tears, Ankita finds herself constrained by the haunting memories of Abhi. Even though she gains insights and lessons from her past behaviour towards Abhi and Vaibhav, she remains ensnared by these memories. After an extended period, the emotional pain Ankita harbours transforms into physical agony. It feels as though an internal force is excavating fragments of her heart with a shovel, leaving behind a profound sense of emptiness as the excavated bits accumulate. Ankita tried a lot to control her wavering mind. She explains her daily life by saying, "Everything around me seemed to have taken a new meaning which I seemed not to have

appreciated earlier” (Shenoy 101). But her memories were like wild horses on a racing spree. She tried to shut them by closing her eyes tightly. In her daily life, her room becomes tidy and her life too. Her physical appearance gets worse too. She lost a lot of weight and became thin. Even she hated herself by looking at the mirror. She was caught with the letters written by Abhi and Vaibhav by her parents. She felt like someone jabbed in her stomach. The letter brought the old memories of Abhi once again. When her parents started questioning about those letters she stood like a spelled statue. She has no idea that her parents will understand her state. Her mother scolds her like anything. Her words cut deep, scooping out her deepest feelings. She knew that she was not entirely correct. Her father struck a match on those letters and the flame started to swallow the words in the letters. Abhi’s blood-soaked words go up in flames. The lump in her throat felt like a trap. But she did not cry even a little. Then she suppressed a lot. A huge, dark void accompanied her. She did not know how to relieve the pain. She wanted it to stop. Later she cut her palm with her nails. When the line of blood appeared, she felt better. She thought that she could bear the real pain, then the pain inside her heart.

The researcher’s analysis reveals that Ankita’s struggles are rooted in the haunting recollections of memories, which profoundly affect her judgment, worries, and self-confidence, escalating her fear. The inability to perform daily tasks at her previous level intensifies the pressure and mental anguish, leading to a state of distress. Describing her pain as if someone is squeezing her throat while blindfolded from behind, Ankita expresses her fear and vulnerability. Attempting to compromise herself as a coping mechanism proves unsuccessful, and her emotional turmoil eventually culminates in uncontrollable sobs before her father’s comforting words. Despite staying at home for a week, there has been no improvement in her behaviour, and she has experienced panic attacks twice. Ankita’s emotional distress escalates to the point where she contemplates self-harm, reflecting a deep sense of dejection. Her attempts to read or engage in daily activities become increasingly challenging, accompanied by feelings of frustration, tears, rage, and helplessness. Ankita likens herself to a broken toy, highlighting the severity of her emotional turmoil. Seeking professional help, she undergoes counselling, but the efforts prove futile, indicating the profound and entrenched nature of her mental health struggles. The researcher recognizes the complexity of Ankita’s emotional state and the challenges she faces in finding effective coping mechanisms.

Ankita’s Spanning Life Phases

Ankita’s life takes unexpected turns, from her promising academic pursuits to the challenges that push her into a mental health facility. In the subsequent struggles, Ankita reaches a critical point where she is admitted to the care of a top psychiatrist and placed in an asylum. In the context of applying the philosophical idea of realism to the novel *Life is What You Make It*, this phase becomes pivotal in exploring philosophical aspects related to the concept of realism. At the outset of this section, Ankita is in a state of complete loss. The doctors studying her case diagnosed her with bipolar disorder, a psychiatric condition characterized by unusual shifts in mood, energy, and activity levels. These shifts, known as manic and depressive episodes, are the defining features of bipolar disorder. Manic episodes may manifest as heightened activity and emotional states, while depressive episodes bring about low mood and energy. The tablets prescribed by the doctors induce drowsiness in Ankita, blurring the distinction between night and day. Even the slightest beam of light becomes intolerable, trapping her within her own body and creating an unbearable fate. Consulting various doctors, collectively recognize the symptoms of bipolar disorder in Ankita’s life, leading to the recommendation of hospital admission for better management and care. Ankita’s attempt to conceal her love for Vaibhav from Abhi and vice versa contributes to her depression. The memories of Abhi and the guilt associated with betraying Vaibhav exacerbate her emotional turmoil, leading to physical illness that eventually transforms into mental illness. She describes the sensation of falling deeper into a bottomless pit, attempting unsuccessfully to rid herself of the haunting memories.

Her parents bear the brunt of her actions, intervening to prevent her from committing suicide and expressing their love, often symbolized by burning the letters from Abhi and Vaibhav in front of her. As Ankita’s hidden struggles unravel through the letters, she discontinues her course, isolating herself at home. Advised to take pills, her condition deteriorates, marked by fainting spells and treatments that fail to uncover the underlying reasons for her behaviour. This phase exemplifies the realistic portrayal of mental health struggles, exploring the profound impact on Ankita’s life and relationships. The researcher recognizes the profound significance of faith in this section, contemplating it as a crucial element for preserving relationships and fostering mutual understanding, faith, and respect. Dr. Madhusudan Jairam, Ankita’s examining doctor, emerges as a beacon of hope in her life, treating her with a constant smile and joy. His reassuring words calm Ankita during moments of frustration, gradually instilling faith in her towards building mental strength and fostering support for his treatment. Ankita, in her hospital room, reflects on the difficulty of facing challenges, “all I found by myself was tough would be like saying that it is hard to climb Mount Everest without capabilities of extreme levels of physical endurance” (Shenoy 165). In a philosophical context, Dr. Madhusudan stands out as a model, embodying kindness, empathy, and spontaneity. His ability to seemingly understand Ankita’s thoughts contributes to a therapeutic environment. Dr. Madhusudan and Dr. Namita guide Ankita back to her regular life through a gradual, step-by-step approach. By the novel’s conclusion, Ankita Sharma has reclaimed her life, finding her career, excitement, and lifestyle. Her recovery is attributed to her strong willpower, courage, and hard work. From being a patient in the asylum, Ankita undergoes a transformative journey, facing various challenges, including the difficulty of holding a pen, reminiscent of her past accomplishments in St. Agnes. As the author notes, “The book is not just about bipolar disorder. It is a story of courage, determination and growing up” (Shenoy 205). It underscores the unpredictability of life, illustrating how one can steer a different path than planned and still find success. The story encapsulates themes of self-belief, perseverance, and the ability to shape one’s destiny. Through Ankita’s journey, the novel encapsulates the essence of realism, acknowledging the ever-changing nature of circumstances and the resilience needed to navigate through them.

Realism in Shaping Destiny

The researcher employs the theory of realism to unravel the factors contributing to Ankita’s suffering. Whether it stems from her upbringing, characterized by her parents encouraging a free-spirited lifestyle, or her own wavering emotions leading to love entanglements with two individuals simultaneously, realism becomes the guiding thread. “The rise of civilization and human avarice has resulted in a significant flaw in the ecological process” (Jenner and Jebakumar 402). Despite Ankita not being portrayed as a modernized girl, her casual mistakes and subsequent embarrassment are viewed through the lens of realism, absolving her of culpability. The researcher endeavours to present Ankita as a positive character by delving deep into her life with an innovative approach. Realism becomes a tool to elucidate the authentic experiences of the protagonist, portraying her as an angel despite her perceived transgressions (Connery 52). Ankita’s life is depicted as an enigma that only she can unravel, and the subsequent events shatter her academic pursuits and content life. Realism, in this context, underscores that Ankita’s suffering is a consequence of love, which manifested twice in her life – once for Vaibhav and later for Abhishek. Whether “love can happen twice” (Singh) is explored within the framework of modern-day complexities, where love extends beyond romantic relationships to encompass various forms. Realism intervenes to rationalize Ankita’s dual experiences of love, emphasizing that her time in the asylum transforms her illness, ultimately leading her to embrace a career as an artist. The novel concludes fifteen years later, revealing Ankita’s remarkable academic achievements, marriage, and motherhood, offering a happy ending for all characters. In exploring Ankita’s struggles, the researcher confronts a challenge inherent in realism – the need for a comprehensive portrayal of individual characters. Realism in literature navigates public and moral humanistic issues,

striving for a practical understanding of societal problems. The researcher acknowledges the limitations of imagination within realism, emphasizing its essence as a keen observation of life as it unfolds. The recent resurgence of realism is attributed to the emphasis on empirical data in modern science and the growing desire among artists and readers for a pragmatic understanding of social issues.

CONCLUSION

The application of the philosophical concept of realism in Preeti Shenoy's novel *Life is What You Make It* provides a profound insight into the idea that individuals are the architects of their own fate. The novel, encapsulated by the titular phrase, resonates with the notion that life's trajectory is shaped by personal actions and choices. The philosophical underpinnings of realism, emphasizing the influence of individuals on their present circumstances, are evident throughout Ankita Sharma's journey. As the researcher delves into the intricacies of the protagonist's life, it becomes apparent that the narrative aligns closely with the philosophical tenets of realism. Shakespeare's poignant quote, "Men at some times are masters of their fate". (Julius Caesar Act 1, scene 2, 139) aptly captures the essence of the novel, reinforcing the idea that individuals hold sway over their destinies. The novel's association with realism becomes more pronounced as the researcher navigates through the commonplaces of everyday life, particularly in the middle and lower classes. The characters, shaped by communal factors and surroundings, underscore the essential elements of realism. The narrative style, reflecting a loyalty to real-life experiences, further solidifies the connection to realism. The researcher concluded that Preeti Shenoy's *Life is What You Make It* is a philosophical fiction. Realism has been chiefly concerned with the commonplaces of everyday life in the centre of the middle and lower classes, where character is an invention of communal factors and surroundings are the essential element in the staged complications in literature, an approach that takings from an examination of realism in terms of natural forces. Realism is a style of writing that gives the feeling of footage or reflecting loyally a real way of life. The term refers, sometimes confusingly, both to a fictional method based on thorough correctness of account and to a more common attitude that rejects adulation, diversion, and other wasteful behaviour of romance in favour of recognizing strictly the exact problems of life.

The emotional story of a young girl, Ankita Sharma, who confronts adversity and disruption to her seemingly perfect life. The novel spans two cities in early-eighties India, portraying the transformation of Ankita from a vibrant, ambitious student to a patient in a mental health hospital. Pretty and smart, Ankita has everything she needs: friends, boys in hot detection, and admittance into a premier management school for her MBA. But six months later, she finds herself a patient in a mental health hospital. How did she get there and will she ever get back her life again? Someway, the whole thing that made up her globe has been taken away and now she has to fight like she has by no means had to, to get well her rightful lot.

A mesmerizing story of the pains of growing up, and the power afforded by trust and the spirit, here is an inspiring story for modern readers. The protagonist's journey, fraught with psychological suffering and societal expectations, aligns with the broader literary context where modern, educated, middle-class women articulate their discontent with oppressive institutions. Ankita's suppression and depression form the crux of the narrative, culminating in her emergence as an artist after overcoming significant struggles. In essence, the article illustrates the interplay of destiny in Ankita's life and how she transcends suppression through resilience and determination. The novel reinforces the idea that life's challenges, though disruptive, can be overcome through individual agency and the unwavering pursuit of one's path. As the researcher concludes, *Life is What You Make It* serves as a poignant reminder that destiny, while unpredictable, can be navigated and shaped by the choices individuals make.

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