

Self-Determination and Resilience: Women's Empowerment in Preeti Shenoy's *Life Is What You Make It*

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Abstract

Literature has long served as a mirror to human life. Preeti Shenoy's *Life Is What You Make It* is a vigorous and thought-provoking novel. It traces the emotional and psychological growth of its protagonist, Ankita Sharma. Through Ankita's journey, Shenoy delivers a strong message about women's empowerment. Ankita is charming, ambitious, and intelligent. She challenges the orthodox expectations placed on women in society. She makes her own choices in education and relationships. She stands up for her dreams even while facing depression and severe constraints. The novel foregrounds mental health, since Ankita battles bipolar disorder. She fights personal conflicts and then rebuilds her life with courage and dignity. In this way, the author stresses the value of self-faith and self-determination. Her academic success and self-discovery show that mental strength and education are vital tools for empowerment. This paper studies empowerment in the novel. Everyone faces problems, and at times, life becomes unbearable. The paper argues that suicide can never be a solution and that hope must be held onto. The novel is finally about faith, courage, and resilience, the forces that shape human destiny. Through Ankita, Shenoy insists that life is indeed what one makes of it, and that women hold the power to shape their own fate.

Keywords: Empowerment, resilience, destiny, bipolar disorder, mental health, self-discovery.

Introduction

Indian writing in English often explores empowerment and self-discovery. This is especially true when the female characters must navigate between social norms and personal goals. Writers such as Anita Nair, Shashi Deshpande, and Manju Kapur are known for portraying women's journeys toward self-realization. Their heroines search for freedom and power within a restrictive order. For instance, Deshpande's protagonists move from silence toward self-discovery and finally claim their own agency (Kumari and Sharma 60). Similarly, Nair presents women who overcome adversity and build a firm identity in society (Devi). Preeti Shenoy belongs to this line of storytellers. She writes plainly about ordinary women who confront extraordinary difficulty. Her fiction gives readers characters they meet in daily life, and that closeness lets readers relive their struggles (Sharma and Gupta 18).

This paper examines how empowerment operates in *Life Is What You Make It*. It also shows how a person can make life better and more meaningful. Sometimes a wrong decision leaves an individual with nothing but regret. In such moments, inner strength helps a person overcome the obstacles of life. Empowerment here is not only social; it is deeply personal. Naila Kabeer defines empowerment as the enlargement of a

person's ability to make strategic life choices where that ability was once denied (437). Ankita's story fits this idea closely. She reclaims the power to choose her education, her relationships, and finally her recovery.

The novel deserves attention for another reason. It speaks openly about a subject that Indian society long kept hidden. Mental illness rarely entered popular fiction, and when it did, it was often reduced to madness or shame. Shenoy breaks that pattern. She gives the reader a young, capable woman whose worth survives her diagnosis. The book therefore doubles as a quiet plea for awareness. It asks readers to treat suffering with compassion instead of scorn (Ravikumar 21-30). Reading such a story can change attitudes, and a change in attitude is the first step toward help-seeking. For this reason the novel belongs in any discussion of empowerment in contemporary Indian writing.

The Author and Her Work

Preeti Shenoy is a celebrated Indian writer, blogger, speaker, and illustrator. She was born on 21 December 1971. She has written more than fifteen bestselling novels. She ranks among the top five highest-selling authors in India. She has also appeared on the Forbes long list of the most influential celebrities. Her first work was a collection titled 34 Bubblegums and Candies, drawn from real life. Critics note that her quick rise owes much to her choice of themes. She writes about the mental strain faced by the youth of present-day India (Choudhary 45). Her characters resonate with people the reader already knows, and this makes her stories feel intimate and true.

Her first popular novel, *Life Is What You Make It* (2011), explores bipolar disorder. It was followed by a sequel, *Wake Up, Life Is Calling*. Her novels range widely across contemporary romance, love, and relationships. They include *Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake* (2012), *The Secret Wish List* (2012), *It Happens for a Reason* (2014), *A Hundred Little Flames* (2017), *The Rule Breakers* (2021), and *All the Love You Deserve* (2023). Her writing is simple and relatable. It deals with mental health, socio-economic problems, gender issues, and the everyday constraints faced by young adults. She has received several honours, including the Author Popular Choice Award (Nair and Menon).

An Overview of the Novel

Life Is What You Make It is a prevailing and thought-provoking work. It deals with the emotional, mental, and personal growth of Ankita Sharma. The story is set in India during the late twentieth century. This was a time when mental illness and women's independence were seldom discussed in the open (Ravikumar). The novel carries the reader through Ankita's highs and lows. In the end it offers a compelling story of self-empowerment. Shenoy explores empowerment through several lenses. These include self-realisation, resistance to social expectation, mental-health awareness, education, and personal resilience. Ankita's movement from helplessness to strength is inspiring. It is also a bold remark on the need for self-acceptance in a society that often narrows women's choices.

Love is a powerful emotion. It is bound up with human life and with nature itself. Yet sometimes it becomes the very cause of suffering, as the protagonist learns. Ankita Sharma lives in Kerala with her parents and has a boyfriend named Vaibhav. The family later moves to Cochin because of her father's transfer. She begins her education at a women's college there. Ankita and Vaibhav keep their relationship alive through letters. She tells him about her college and her friends and how much she enjoys campus life. She has no idea of the change that awaits her. At an intercollegiate meet she meets Abhishek, a kind young man who admires her. His respect and gentleness make her feel proud. At the same time she feels

guilty about betraying Vaibhav. Later Abhishek writes to her about his intense feelings. Her friend Suvi persuades her to accept his love, and their bond is revived.

Meanwhile, Ankita excels in her studies and strives for professional success. For her, a career matters most. Abhishek loves her deeply and wishes to marry her. He believes he cannot live without her. Ankita, however, rejects his proposal because she wants to concentrate on her career. She recalls the moment in her own words:

How could I promise? 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. (Life Is What You Make It 70)

After refusing the proposal, Ankita feels a fresh sense of pride. She secures a place in one of the best colleges for her MBA. She senses that people around her are jealous and wish to bring her down. In the end she decides to end the relationship and move to Mumbai for a new life. Abhishek is shocked by the news and tragically takes his own life. This tragedy becomes the source of Ankita's deep guilt, and her mental collapse follows soon after (Verma and Rao 88).

In Mumbai, Ankita continues her MBA. She throws herself into her studies and neglects her health. She reads constantly but takes little care of her body. As a result she grows weak, irritable, and strange in her behaviour. Her friends and family sense that something has gone wrong. She even attempts suicide, which shocks everyone around her.

Ankita is later diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She is admitted to a hospital in Bangalore. She feels shattered and struggles to accept what has happened. Once a bright student, she now cannot read even a children's book because of her condition. By good fortune she finds a doctor, Mr. Madhusudan, who fills her with hope and encouragement. His support helps her regain the strength to fight back and change her life. He tells her:

"You are a very brave girl, Ankita," he said as he patted my hand. Faith is a strange and a powerful thing and it can work miracles. It was something I would soon discover. (Life 152)

Dr. Madhusudan inspires her through his own story. His sister's suicide led him to study psychiatry and help others facing mental illness. He tells Ankita that life is a gift and must never be thrown away. Her determination and persistence soon pay off. She regains control of her life. She learns to manage her condition while still pursuing her goals and dreams.

The plot is built around two suicides and one recovery. Abhishek dies, the doctor's sister dies, and Ankita lives. The contrast is deliberate. Shenoy does not preach, yet the message is plain. Suicide ends the story of a life that might have healed. Ravikumar reads the novel as a call for compassion toward those in pain. The doctor's own grief gives his counsel weight. He has already lost someone he could not save, and so he fights hard to save Ankita. Through this quiet structure, the novel argues that no problem is worth a life. Hope, care, and time can carry a person through even the darkest phase.

Empowerment through Mental-Health Awareness

One of the strongest themes of empowerment in the novel concerns mental health. Ankita is diagnosed with bipolar disorder. The condition brings extreme mood swings, from manic episodes to deep depression. Bipolar disorder is a serious brain disorder that causes dramatic shifts in mood, energy, and the ability to carry out daily tasks (Selvi and Kumar 155). In the conservative setting of the novel, mental illness is tied to shame and silence. Shenoy challenges this stigma. She places Ankita's mental-health

journey at the very centre of the narrative. She treats the illness not as a weakness but as a turning point for self-discovery.

This choice matters in the Indian context. Studies show that stigma around bipolar disorder remains high in India and often keeps patients from seeking help (Pal, Born, and Cuellar-Barboza). Families, too, face isolation and social rejection. Poor awareness feeds a cycle of shame, suffering, and silence (Krishnan). Research further finds that internalised stigma lowers the chance a patient will seek or continue treatment (Grover et al. 555). The fear of being labelled keeps many sufferers quiet. Shenoy writes directly against this fear. The novel treats the disorder as an ordinary illness rather than a moral fault. Dr. Madhusudan tells Ankita, “It is an illness like any other illness. See, when you have a fracture, you go to an orthopaedic, right?” (Shenoy 137). He then names the very problem the book sets out to fight: “People have a stigma about it. They do not understand the severity of it” (Shenoy 137). By dramatising the treatment and recovery, the novel works against silence. It shows that seeking help is an act of strength, not defeat.

The novel also refuses the easy view that illness is a personal failure. It presents care, medication, and patience as ordinary parts of healing. The doctor's steady comfort marks the turning point of the story. He assures Ankita, “You are a very brave girl, Ankita” (Shenoy 152), and this faith slowly becomes her own. The power to heal, the novel suggests, lies partly within the self and partly in the hands of those who care. Mental illness does not define a person's worth. It is one challenge among many, and it can be overcome with the right guidance and resolve. Shenoy's simple and empathetic narration lets the reader connect with the disorder rather than fear it (Selvi and Kumar 156).

Self-Realisation and Self-Acceptance

Another layer of empowerment comes from Ankita's inner journey of self-realisation. Early in the story she appears to be the ideal daughter, beautiful, intelligent, and obedient. Yet her seemingly perfect life hides a deep conflict. She is torn between her own desires and the expectations of society. She struggles to balance relationships, mental health, and academic pressure. The turning point arrives when she reaches an emotional breaking point that leads to hospital care. That breakdown, however, becomes the ground for her breakthrough. Such fiction shows the human mind learning through trial and error (Selvi and Kumar 158).

Ankita's recovery shows this self-realisation in action. She does not credit luck or magic for her return to health. She names her own effort as the cause. Looking back on her progress, she reflects that “it was because of my strong will power and determination alone that I had bounced back so quickly” (Life 161). The admission is quietly powerful. She takes ownership of her healing. She learns to stop measuring her worth by the standards of others. She begins to build her life on her own terms. Through this change, Shenoy suggests that empowerment often begins with full self-acceptance, flaws and all.

This inward turn recalls a wider pattern in Indian women's fiction. Deshpande's protagonists move from imposed silence toward a voice of their own (Kumari and Sharma 61). Ankita follows the same arc. For much of the story she hides her guilt and her fear. Recovery begins only when she stops hiding. She names her illness, owns her past, and speaks her truth. Self-acceptance, then, is not a soft or passive act. It is the hard first step of empowerment. Verma and Rao note that Ankita's search for an identity beyond her illness drives the whole novel forward. Her worth is not erased by what she has suffered; it is deepened by how she responds.

Resistance to Societal Norms

The novel also examines social norms with a critical eye. Ankita lives in a world where young women are expected to conform. They must be respectful, silent about their feelings, and obedient to a fixed path of education, marriage, and motherhood. Her romantic choices, her emotional intensity, and later her diagnosis all break with what society deems proper for a woman. Indian women writers have long exposed these pressures. Shashi Deshpande, for example, shows heroines entangled in the ropes of tradition who slowly claim their agency (Kumari and Sharma 65).

Ankita chooses to break free rather than quietly conform. She stops hiding her past. She accepts her illness. She pursues a path that matches her passion. Shenoy uses this boldness to critique the rigid norms that limit women's choices. Kabeer reminds us that empowerment lies in the ability to make strategic life choices once denied (437). By creating a heroine who claims her autonomy even after a devastating fall, Shenoy empowers not only Ankita but every reader who has ever felt confined by cultural expectation.

There is a further layer to this resistance. In many households, a mental-health diagnosis brings blame on the whole family. The illness becomes a secret to be guarded. Shenoy states this plainly in her author's note: "Mental health issues are still a big taboo, especially in India" (Shenoy 170). Ankita's openness therefore breaks two taboos at once. She defies the pressure to marry, and she refuses to hide her condition. Both acts invite judgment, yet both are essential to her freedom. Bhatia observes that contemporary Indian fiction increasingly links self-discovery to the honest treatment of mental health. Shenoy's novel is a clear example. Ankita's private struggle becomes a public statement about a woman's right to define herself.

Education and Career as Tools of Empowerment

Education and career serve as further tools of empowerment. Despite her illness, Ankita's commitment to study never fails. After her recovery she completes her degree and builds a successful creative career. Her academic success is not merely a sign of cleverness. It is a mark of resilience and ambition. The novel makes clear that education can be a form of liberation. It gives individuals the confidence and the resources to shape their own lives. Kabeer treats such resources and achievements as key dimensions of empowerment (438). For Ankita, learning becomes a way to rebuild her identity apart from her mental-health history and free of social judgment.

Her choice to place career above marriage also carries weight. In her world, a woman was expected to marry and settle, not to chase professional ambition. Ankita refuses that script. She turns down a devoted suitor because, as she puts it, "my dreams had grown beyond the town of Cochin" (Life 70). She wants a wider world, and she reaches for it. This drive is a form of agency in Kabeer's sense, the power to negotiate one's own path (Kabeer 438). Her pursuit of knowledge and self-reliance shines as a guiding star for readers who face similar trials (Devi). Other Indian women writers make the same point through different heroines. Anita Nair's travellers and Deshpande's silent wives all learn that education and work can open a door out of dependence (Sharma and Gupta 27).

Personal Resilience

The theme of resilience ties every form of empowerment together. Ankita's journey is not easy. She falls, she fails, and she suffers deeply. What makes her story empowering is not that she avoids hardship. It is that she overcomes it. Shenoy herself frames the novel this way. In her author's note she writes that the book "is a story of courage, determination and growing up" and "a story of faith, belief and perseverance too and charting your own destiny" (Life 170). This is the heart of the matter. Resilience is not the absence

of pain. It is the will to keep charting one's own path through it. Shenoy's portrayal of that will is honest and grounded. There is no magical cure and no sudden turnaround. Ankita's recovery is slow, painful, and uneven, yet it is real. This truthful account is what gives the novel its power. It tells readers that they too can rise, however far they have fallen. Such honest storytelling also kindles empathy, since the reader shares the character's suffering and hope (Choudhary 46).

Conclusion

Life Is What You Make It is a deeply empowering novel. It urges readers to embrace their inner strength. It asks them to confront mental-health challenges without shame and to shape their own destiny. Through Ankita's story, Shenoy shows that empowerment is not about perfection. It is about determination, self-awareness, and the courage to keep going. The novel weaves together education, mental health, self-discovery, resistance to social norms, and resilience. From these strands it draws a lasting and universal message. Life, however complicated, is ultimately what a person makes of it. In telling one woman's recovery, Shenoy affirms that women hold the power to author their own fate. Her novel joins a wider body of Indian women's writing that moves its heroines from silence and suffering toward self-discovery and strength.

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