

## An Exploration of Self-Discovery in Preeti Shenoy's *The Secret*

### *Wish List*

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### **Abstract**

Indian English literature frequently engages with the theme of self-discovery, a motif of significant personal and professional relevance to women's lives. Preeti Shenoy's *The Secret Wishlist* offers a compelling narrative in this vein, centering on empowerment and the reclamation of one's aspirations. The novel follows Diksha, a woman in her thirties trapped in an unfulfilling marriage and a monotonous domestic routine. Once a vibrant adolescent with her own dreams, Diksha has gradually lost her sense of self amid societal and familial pressures. The story charts her transformative journey as she reconnects with her buried identity and ambitions. This change is catalyzed by the rediscovery of a secret wish list she created as

a teenager, which becomes a blueprint for altering her conventional life. Encouraged by a cousin to revisit her past passions, Diksha embarks on a path of personal renewal, confronting traditional constraints and her own insecurities. Through Diksha's emotional and psychological evolution, Shenoy skillfully critiques the social norms imposed on women. This paper examines the process of self-discovery in *The Secret Wishlist*, analyzing how the protagonist navigates issues of identity, personal growth, and societal expectations. It ultimately posits that self-discovery is an ongoing, dynamic endeavor and advocates for the embrace of individuality and self-determined life paths.

**Keywords:** Self-discovery, empowerment, secret wishlist, identity, vision.

In literature, the theme of self-discovery frequently acts as a catalyst for character development, shaping their relationships and ultimate transformations. It reflects the universal journey of understanding oneself, making choices, and finding one's place in an increasingly complex world. In an era marked by rapid change socially, culturally, and technologically, stories of self-discovery allow readers to explore personal and collective identities, navigate internal conflicts, and confront societal expectations. The advent theme of self-discovery in India can be found in the writing of important Indian women writers, such as Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Chitra Banerjee, Preeti Shenoy, and others. These writers present a realistic icon of contemporary society. Self-discovery is a crucial theme in modern narratives, evoking deeply with contemporary audiences.

Preeti Shenoy is one of India's leading and best-selling contemporary authors, known for her emotionally rich and familiar novels. Her works focus on themes such as love, mental health, self-discovery, empowerment, and relationships. Shenoy's narrative style is simple yet effective and appealing to a wide range of readers. Her important novels are *Life Is What You Make It* (2011), *The Secret Wish List* (2012), *Tea for Two* and *A Piece of Cake* (2012), *The*

One You Can Not Have (2013), It Happens for a Reason (2014), and The Rule Breakers (2018), and others have won appreciation from readers all over the world for their noteworthy depictions of female characters. Shenoy has won the hearts of female readers all around with her skill in developing unique and appealing characters. She portrays women's personal identities and exclusive qualities. The women characters in her novels are a classic example of the concept of the modern woman. Her literary works explore the experiences of youthful women who frequently face social and family constraints. Preeti Shenoy's famous novel *The Secret Wish List* (2012) talks about a young woman who is bound by tradition and afterwards cries out for her freedom.

Preeti Shenoy's *The Secret Wish List* is a contemporary Indian novel that deftly explores the intertwined themes of self-discovery, female autonomy, and the courage to defy societal conventions. Through the journey of its protagonist, the novel presents a subtle narrative of an individual reclaiming agency over her own life after years of silent acquiescence to patriarchal expectations.

The novel is centred on Diksha, a 35-year-old homemaker whose life apparently appears stable, even enviable, yet inwardly is marked by boredom and emotional stagnation. The narrative begins with Diksha's existence as a dutiful wife to Sandeep and a caring mother to Abhay. She has long conformed to the expectations of her family and society, moulding herself into a role that offers sanctuary but no personal fulfillment. Her daily routine, dominated by household responsibilities, is devoid of passion, independent choice, and self-expression.

Through a series of flashbacks, we learn that Diksha's present life is the result of a radical shift from her youthful ambitions. As a vibrant, vigorous teenager, she once aspired to pursue her interests, nurture friendships, and explore life freely. However, an incident in her teenage years involving a romantic connection and its consequent fallout altered the trajectory

of her life. Social pressures and familial displeasure steered her towards an early marriage, effectively silencing her dreams.

Diksha is the protagonist of the novel, and the plot is all about her. Ankit, Tanu, Sandeep, and Abhay are among the other characters in the novel. The story begins in Chennai with Diksha, a 16-year-old girl, and her best friend is Tanu. Most of the time they prefer to have combined studies and spend a lot of time together. They discuss everything under the sky, from studies to their latest crush. Every human being does have crushes, and it may vary from individual to individual. For some it is a lifetime crush, and for some it is an everyday crush. The fact of life is that the first crush remains for some like an unforgettable person in our life. At some point in life, every girl succumbs to infatuation and fascination towards one individual. So too, Diksha, like any other teenager, falls in love with Ankit. He is the best friend of her elder brother. They fall in love and meet each other persistently, and they start spending time together. When they go on a school project trip, they indulge in an unpardonable error. As they are young, their short encounter at night pushes them to commit the mistake of kissing. No sooner had their lives turned completely topsy-turvy when the incident occurred. They were caught by their teachers, and they in turn reported the matter to their parents. One silly teenage mistake has changed the life of Diksha for a lifetime. Her parents could not exonerate her for her mistake; , nevertheless she has begged pardon several times. They treat her like a criminal, and her father pronounced that “we are pulling you out of the school. No more codes for you. We will see what can be done,” he says with an air of finality (The Secret Wish List, 58).

Diksha has never thought one mistake of her life could be so costly, leading to her change of school, and she implores her mother, but to no avail. Her mother does not listen to her and remains silent as if she has become a stone-hearted woman. “But her heart is as hard as stone, and she does not melt. No amount of pleading and apologizing works.” (The Secret Wish List, 59)

Subsequent to the incident, Diksha is unable to continue her college education. She is compelled to get married at the age of 19 to Sandeep and soon gives birth to a male child. Now, Diksha, as a mother, plays a significant role in grooming Abhay. She becomes a devoted housewife and takes care of everything about her husband and son. She turns into a great supporting system to them in terms of domestic duties. At times they even become more demanding for food and other things. Numerous times she feels that her husband and son do not have any respect for her, and they treat her approximately like a maid. This makes her feel ominous.

On several occasions, Diksha suffers at the hands of her parents and spouse. Neither as a daughter nor as a wife has she had any respite. She has paid a vast price for her teenage mistake. Her parents and brother regard her as a sinner, and they have emotionally abandoned her. She has a sense of being left out, and she is dissatisfied in spite of being married for 15 years. Her husband, Sandeep, takes her for granted. When she drags through housekeeping chores all day, he never helps her. He thinks she is unsuitable for her and feels that it is the responsibility of a wife to take care of the family. He regards her as a second-class citizen and as an income earner; he has a high estimation of himself. Diksha is portrayed by Shenoy as a dedicated wife but is always oppressed by her husband.

The novel begins with Diksha, a traditional Indian housewife in her thirties, living a routine life in a marriage stripped of affection or excitement. She is married to Sandeep, a typical patriarchal husband who expects her to play the role of a homemaker and caregiver without questioning. Despite outward appearances of a "settled" life, Diksha feels emotionally vacant and suffocated. "He never asked me to join him for breakfast. And in the early days, I did not mind it the least bit. As I would watch him eat, my heart would fill with pride at a meal well-prepared and my wifely duty of feeding my husband, done to perfection." (Secret wish list, 8)

Diksha, the character, is always struggling with speculation and dissatisfaction in her marriage. Diksha satisfies traditional roles as a wife and mother, like preparing meals and doing other chores for Sandeep and their son, Abhay. In spite of that, she feels unrewarded and ensnared and begins to see herself more as a servant than an equal partner. When cousin Vibha questions her why Sandeep doesn't help her with household chores, it prompts Diksha to reflect on her life. Diksha reveals to feeling empty and bitter due to years of self-neglect and recognizes the need for change. Diksha sits in her cherished garden, reflecting on her lost desires over the past fifteen years. An overall tone of the novel is a poignant reflection on the challenges of modern marriages and balancing family liabilities with personal desires.

Diksha undergoes a complete transformation after her marriage, and she relinquishes everything for the sake of her family. She has almost forgotten about her preferences, and she is baffled. Diksha says, "What have I done with my life? Where am I headed? I feel miserable and sorry as I sit there and take stock of my life. I have everything, yet I have nothing. And I have no idea what I am going to do." (The Secret Wish List, 16) Life for Diksha has become mundane and boring. She feels vexed with her uninteresting life, and she desires to bring some color to her life and transform it totally.

The narrative gains momentum when Diksha reconnects with Vibha, her childhood friend, after several years. Vibha's life, in stark contrast to Diksha's, is filled with independence, career attainment, and self-confidence. During a casual conversation, Vibha reminds Diksha of the "secret wishlist" she had written as a teenager, a list of desires and ambitions she once hoped to achieve. This rediscovery becomes the emotional and thematic anchor of the novel. She writes again a new list of her few wishes. They include snorkelling, getting drunk, learning salsa, taking a vacation alone, without family but with a friend, and some other wishes. After writing the wish list, she realizes how she has shut the doors of her heart against her wishes. She has realized that she is leading a boring life, and she has been in

the delusion that she is happy with her marriage so far. She has imagined that she has everything. Only after writing the wish list has she grasped that she has to carry out many things in her life, which her heart craves.

Soon a transformation dawns on Diksha; the wish list, though seemingly whimsical, is exemplary of Diksha's buried identity and suppressed aspirations. Items on the list range from learning to dance and travelling to faraway places to experiencing romantic recklessness and taking control of her personal choices. Motivated by nostalgia and a growing dissatisfaction with her present life, Diksha timidly begins to pursue the goals from her wish list. She enrolls in a dance class, reconnects with old friends, and allows herself to explore new experiences. Each pleased item on the list serves as a catalyst for self-realization, slowly razing the mental and emotional restraints she had adopted over the years.

As Diksha reconnects with her past, she remembers she was once the effervescent girl; during her teen years, she was spirited, full of dreams, and adventurous. But a mistake she made during those years, which led to a scandal in her traditional family, cost her freedom and led her down a path of obligatory conformity. She had written a secret wish list as a teenager, a list of things she wanted to do in her life. However, that list elapsed as responsibilities bestrode. Her parents want to get rid of her after a mistake she had committed as a teenager. Her parents punished her by getting her married off in the middle of her education. They do not even bother to ask whether she likes Sandeep. Ankit was also involved in the act of kissing, but his parents were the least bothered. The society did not consider him guilty of his action. In the patriarchal society, the honor of the family is on the shoulders of the girl. Boys never bear the crucifixion of honour. They enjoy the love, reverence, and chattels of their family. A man is seen as the torchbearer for the next generations. He draws a lot of respect for being a man, and a girl is often seen as the burden to their family whom the parents want to get rid of. Girls of parents live in perpetual fear that their daughter should not disgrace or bring disrepute

to their family. Since a daughter is seen as a responsible person to safeguard their glory and name, Diksha falls victim to patriarchal discrimination.

We see that Diksha's mother-in-law is as authentic and supportive as a source of succour and strength. She stands by Diksha and often criticizes her son, as she never liked his behaviour. Diksha and her mother-in-law are like companions, and their alliance is so robust that she understands how much Diksha has been suffering in that house since her marriage. Diksha's mother has never been there for her when she has needed her mother the most, and it was her mother-in-law that always filled that hollowness.

A modern woman is not the one who gives up her aspirations due to social anxiety or for any other reason. She can express herself and achieve her goals despite hardship; she is a self-expressing lady. After getting married to Sandeep, Diksha was quite submissive and solitary, but her supportive mother-in-law developed in her a new identity. Her encouragement for Diksha is a rare and remarkable one as she stands by her daughter-in-law, holding her hand as she pursues her dreams and challenging her narcissistic son's outmoded ideologies. Consequently, women who join hands can accomplish great things in life. Diksha's mother-in-law even says, "You know, I felt much the same way. I too got married to Sandeep's father way too early. I have never ever lived my life or done things for myself. But that was okay for women of that generation. Certainly not of your generation." (The Secret Wish List, 112)

After meeting her cousin Vibha and discussing her secret wish list, Diksha ventures out to materialize her wish list. As part of her wish list, she enrolls for salsa. Through salsa, Diksha experiences joy, self-reliance, and a sense of agency. The dance trainer Gaurav becomes her best friend, and she attends dance classes without the knowledge of her husband, Sandeep. If she reveals it, he would never ever give permission for dancing. He strongly believes that the place of a woman is sternly within four walls. She should not even think of going outside and

gratifying her dreams, he cautions, and finally Sandeep comes to know about her secret dance classes. He goes to the dance class and manhandles Gaurav and Diksha. He humiliates her by dragging her out of the class in front of everyone. He hits her and takes her home and beats her mercilessly. She realizes that she has married a monster.

Sandeep is a true delegate of male-dominated society, which encourages domestic violence to establish the authority of man over woman. He even wallows in marital rape. It is ubiquitous in our society, but most of the women do not reveal this but endure silently. There are many women who are not even aware that a husband cannot have sex without the consent of his wife. Preeti Shenoy spotlights these issues of the Indian society, which are seen as the fragile subjects. These are considered prohibited topics, which most of the people do not want to discuss. Shenoy is a bold writer to project these issues and bring heedfulness among people. Diksha is not treated as an ideal partner by her husband; instead, he has always tried to dominate and prove his superiority over her. He feels proud that he is the sustainer of the family. He expects that all domestic duties should be done by his wife, including the education of their son. He does not even maintain a father-and-son relationship and has always seen Diksha as a subservient creature. Her wish list is a form of escape from this repression. Her quest is for a world where she can breathe and enjoy freedom and be herself. She yearns for a world where there is no sign of segregation between man and woman. Finally she leaves her husband and lives with Ankit along with her son. She initiates her salsa institute along with Gaurav with the help of Ankit. She obtains financial independence and recognizes the value of economic independence, and consequently, she manifests as a liberated woman. The novel ends with Diksha venturing on a new life, not just kinaesthetically, but emotionally and psychologically. She doesn't have all the answers, but for the first time in her life, she is living and not just existing.

Diksha's evolution is not smooth. She battles guilt, social expectations, and social anxiety. She even contemplates the consequences her actions might have on her son and extended family. But she recognizes that living a deception for the sake of others is the greatest injustice to oneself. She makes the bold decision to depart from her marriage, choosing a life of self-esteem and autonomy over one of suppressed feelings.

The novel serves as a powerful reminder that self-discovery is not a progressive path but a series of trials and triumphs that shape one's identity. Through Diksha's experiences, Shenoy emphasizes that true happiness and fulfillment come from within, and the key to unlocking this lies in self-approval and resilience. The narrative encourages readers to reflect on their own lives, inspiring them to embrace their flaws and pursue their dreams with steadfast determination. Ultimately, *The Secret Wish List* is a celebration of the human spirit's capacity to overcome challenges and reframe one's destiny, making it a compelling read for anyone on their own journey of self-discovery.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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