

# Psychological Realism in Preeti Shenoy's *The One You Cannot Have*

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**Abstract:** Preeti Shenoy's *The One You Cannot Have* vividly captures what people feel, remember and fight with themselves through the characters of Aman, Shruti and Anjali. The novel is more than a love story, that explores the minds of those who cannot escape the pain of their past. In this paper, as a researcher I would like to examine Shenoy's use of psychological reality to portray in a very realistic sense heartbreak, guilt, longing, regret, confusion and emotional healing. The characters in the novel are not magnificent or special; they are just regular people who have a lot of emotional issues. There is a sense of stuckness in Aman's memory of Shruti and a sense of guilt and ambivalence in Shruti that put family pressure over her love. Anjali is an emblem of mental strength, self-respect and the opportunity of healing. Shenoy's simple narration, memory, inner reflection and shifting emotions gives the novel a psychological depth and realism. In this paper, it is argued that the novel is not only about love that is not realised, but about the workings of the mind as well. It also shows how the characters' emotions change in response to what others think of them, their family pressures and the choices that they make. *The One You Cannot Have* is one among the important novelistic work in modern Indian English that has been written with psychological realism.

**Keywords:** Modern Indian fiction, psychological realism, emotions, inner conflict, memory

Preeti Shenoy is a contemporary Indian writer in English, who is well-known for her insightful portrayals of the lives of ordinary people. The love, loss, mental pain and long journey to healing are the subject of most of her novels. This is very well illustrated in *The One You Cannot Have*. It is a story of heartbreak and a new beginning, but it is also a tender examination of the mind in the wake of love's downfall and the moving on that doesn't happen. The novel has lots of psychological aspects. It depicts emotions as sadness, guilt, fear, confusion, love, jealousy and hope, in a manner that is reminiscent of reality. This is why it can be read as an important expression of psychological reality in a new Indian fiction.

In the case of writing, psychological realism refers to the author's attempt to portray the way the characters in the story think and feel that is true and complex. It will not be happy or sad with simple names such as these. The opposite, instead, presents a range of emotions, moods and thoughts which are constantly changing. In this type of writing, what they may be thinking in their head is often more important than what is going on in the outside world. It may be more important to one to make a small gesture, remember a small moment or think a small thought. In her novel *The One You Cannot Have*, Preeti Shenoy writes this way. Not only does she construct her story through dialogue and actions, but also through character thoughts, remembered scenes, and the internal conflicts the characters have within themselves. For this reason, the novel is somewhat emotional despite the simple plot.

The main plot of the novel is simple to explain. Aman and Shruti were fond of each other a long time ago and wanted to get married. But Shruti leaves the relationship behind, as her family, friends and her own fears are forcing her to leave and marry someone else. After being shocked and hurt, Aman embarks on an overseas journey as a means to escape the pain and start new. Later he returns to India, where he meets Anjali. She falls in love with him and lets him have a second chance.

But his old love continues to haunt him. A lot of the narrative revolves around this triangle, but the novel is fascinating because each character thinks, remembers, and fights in their own. All three of them, Aman, Shruti and Anjali, take on mental journeys but they are connected. The novel is very careful about following these trips, and demonstrates how each character attempts to make sense of what has occurred and might still occur.

It mostly follows an inner journey of Aman. He does not say or act in dramatic ways to express his pain. Rather, it is present in little, everyday things, such as the way he reacts to the familiar surroundings, the way he reads an email, the hesitation before responding to a message, or the understanding of Anjali's care, etc. Although he realizes that he should let go of the past, he continues to walk around in it in his mind. One of the key reasons why he is depressed is the disparity between what he knows and how he feels. In his case, there are two pulls on him at the same time. His mind is saying 'now' but his heart is still in the old. This state of being split is demonstrated in this novel by frequent pauses and self-questioning. Aman keeps replaying in his mind what memories he shared with Shruti, how she was shocked by his decision and how he felt helpless after the decision. The reader's memory does not only allow him to remember what occurred in the past, but it also alters his behaviour today.

This is key to Aman not being presented as a perfect victim. Not always he is fair with people around him, such as Anjali, who loves and waits for him. He struggles to tell the truth and he can sometimes deceive himself and others as to how much he loves Shruti. Sometimes, when he should be communicating with her, he turns 'off'. This is a different angle on him that makes him more of a real person and does not allow him to be one-dimensional. The reader can empathize with his pain, as well as his shortcomings. This is key for psychological reality to function. It is much easier to make a black or a white hat who is not guilty. The more

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arduous path is that of Shenoy who depicts a wronged man and commits errors as well. She proves that there is more to the mind than right and wrong. Rather, it is a place of learning slowly, and confusion.

Shruti's character found interesting. It would be a very superficial novel and too easy to guess if she were presented as the woman who left Aman. Rather than that, Shenoy depicts Shruti as someone with deep love but also had some fear and was very impacted by thoughts of family. Getting along with others and parental approval is very important in her family. Aman is not going to the movies with her because her parents don't feel he is a good fit for her, as they are concerned about his family and problems at home. She is afraid that she will have to go through pain and social rejection in the future. But in the end, she does what is apparently the safest thing to do and agrees to marry the man chosen by her parents and want her to marry. Yet, it doesn't make her feel better.

Since then, Shruti has begun to think about how she compares to her husband, and she is always quiet and sad. She ponders over what her life would have been like if she had been with Aman. She attempts to convince herself that it was a good thing, but she was emotionally hurt that took away her joy. This is a battle she faces every day. When she is with her husband or engaged in normal activities, a small incident, such as a song, place or random comment can make her think of Aman. In these ways, Shruti is thrown back into the past and the guilt and hunger are felt. Short scenes, thoughts that elude, nights that won't end are sometimes enough to get Shenoy's point across.

The novel avoids moral condemnation of Shruti by depicting her in this manner. It's not true that she is a cruel betrayer or a helpless victim. When she was around with other people, she tries to do what is appropriate, and then when fights with her mental consequences of it. This is a very much real-life scenario. To hurts her for making such a choice that is good on the outside, bad on the inside. Character of Shruti is an illustration of the way family and social forces can become voices in us. Over time, these whispers evolve to an internal critique, and suppressed sadness. It serves as an important element of the psychological realism of the novel since it intertwines outside rules with inner pain.

Anjali has a different tone of feeling. She enters the novel with a fresh perspective, a fresh attitude. She speaks to Aman as a figure of love but she also speaks to him as a person who is to be understood. She observes and hears him and begins to get close to him. Though she does not have a very easy situation. She copes with a man that is physically here but not mentally. Though she has her own dreams and aspirations, she also feels as though she is taking a step into a story that began long ago. This knowledge influences her behaviours. Sometimes she is very patient, sometimes she is secretly grumpy. The character of Shenoy is given enough space to prove her worth as more than a happy one-dimensional character who is brought on board to 'save' the main male character.

Anjali's hidden insecurities are a reflection of her mind. She does not know if she'll ever be more to Aman than Shruti. It

leaves her wondering how long she can wait for him to be 100% with her. She desires to love, but also takes a look at her own sentiments. This tension manifests as short lulls, emotional detachment, and occasionally disagreements and direct questioning in the form of 'Why?'. These scenes help to convey her pain and illustrate how it is also a burden to assist someone who is hurt. Anjali is a tough girl, yet she is emotionally broken. This is not something that is overlooked in the novel and it certainly does not pretend that waiting is not expensive.

One aspect of memory in *The One You Cannot Have* is particularly fascinating. The past cannot be left behind; it will continue to impact the present. When Aman thinks of her, he does not only visualize Shruti in his mind. The memory has a feeling, a mood and the intensity of the feeling. His view of what is in front of him has changed. The same goes for Shruti's experience of thinking about Aman. It causes guilt, remorse and a sense of discomfort. This novel is surrounded by a second world, that is 'memory'. The mechanism is quite similar to the one in real memory. Sometimes things that are memorable, particularly those that evoke a strong reaction, do not fade out fast. They can be triggered by unexpected, minor incidents and they can be very powerful.

In recognition of this, Shenoy makes good use of it. She also has the tendency of having the story jump around in time but not very much. Rather, it occurs naturally when the characters' thinking seamlessly shifts from one time to another. With this technique, one will have a lot of layers in the story. The reader can sense what is happening in the present, and how the people are still impacted by events from the past. So, the novel does not feel like it goes from point A to point B in a straight line. Like the past and present were connected in a web, crossing over and over themselves. This particular type of structure is effective when creating a psychological realism in that its effect is similar to how our minds actually operate.

The novel also demonstrates the mind's functioning in terms of larger social issues. Aman, Shruti and Anjali are not independent of one another. They exist in a middle-class Indian city where employment, marriage, respectability and duties of family are always on people's minds. The most obvious way that social standards can get into the most private parts of a person's life is through Shruti's choice. She is concerned about hurting her parents, what others think and how things will work in real life, it is not a fantasy. They are a part of her social life and how she grew up. She makes her choice against Aman, in part because she has internalised these ideals. The psychologically of the novel is ensured by the depiction of the fact that this kind of internalisation can become a private hell.

But there is a social side to Aman's adventures, too. Today, men are expected to be strong, tough, and to 'move on' in Indian cities, and not to hold on to the past too tightly. But his pain is not an illusion and it will persist for a long time. It is not hard for Shenoy to show how weak he is. Doing this makes her betray the narrow definition of what it means to be a man, and not just angry or silent but sad. In addition to that, Anjali has to face the opinions of others on what a healthy relationship should look like, and how much a girl should take

for love and understanding. This novel is not only an examination of the individual mind but also an examination of the way in which the rules of society influence the minds of individuals.

The novel for some reason feels mentally real because it does not give the magic answers. There is no one quick event that takes away all the pain. Rather, transitioning from suffering to some sort of peace is slow and bumpy. Most of the characters learn through reflection, through open dialogs and through the passage of time. Slowly, Aman realizes that staying in a relationship that is not a healthy one is doing him and those that love him harm. The long-term implications of her choices are hers to face in her own time and she must do that, as the past cannot be changed. Anjali has to learn the hard way that not all love involves giving without end. Sometimes it involves taking a step back or a step for oneself. Changes are not major, but they are consistent, making them more likely to be true.

The way the novel is written supports this approach to the psyche. Shenoy's writing is accessible and comprehensible. Most of the time, she avoids heavy symbolism and an attempt at an unwarranted story. She instead brings depth to the text through vivid descriptions, conversations with her characters, and straightforward, honest, thoughts she has about herself. This type of styling is convenient. The inner lives of the characters are easy to follow, even for people who are not used to reading academic or theory writing. While being simple does not mean nothing, either. It reveals little sensitive information. If the language that follows a 'line' of conversation, a pause, or a quick thought is clear, it could carry a lot of weight.

*The One You Cannot Have* falls under the serious narration trajectory of Indian English literature that focuses on the common psychology. The novel is not about great historical events or great adventures to be found outside, but rather about emotional issues that arise in the normal course of life. It reveals the significance of issues of grief, guilt, and the struggle for moving on, which should be examined closely. This way it resonates with many people who can see patterns in their lives, even though they are not the same. The novel's psychological reality is at work if this connection between what on read and what one actually did exists.

The depiction of Aman, Shruti and Anjali together offers a complete and complex view of how to experience excessive stress. Each character has a different type of wound. For instance, Aman's wound is broken trust and rejection, Shruti's is guilt and being divided, and Anjali's is an emotional investment not returned, and the fear of being always second best. Such wounds connect and influence one another. The novel does not reveal a perfect solution that is able to heal everyone. Rather, it posts that individuals can only commence to heal when they cease to deny their emotions, accept duty for choices they have made, and release what they are unable to alter. Thus, the novel tells of loss and development.

To conclude, all of this makes *The One You Cannot Have* a great example of psychological reality. It is not like it makes love a happy thing or a sad thing a fleeting moment. It demonstrates love in ways that can make life good but which

can also severely damage people emotionally when disrupted by fear, social pressure, poor communication. The most impressive thing about this novel is that it is so honest. Preeti Shenoy has written in a very clear narrative style, with emotions that are believable and takes into consideration the slow nature of psychological change. Her work is so much like the way people think, feel and remember. This is why it is a significant work of modern Indian relationship and inner life writing.

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