

Negotiating Gender Politics, Marriage and Female Desire in Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers*

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Abstract— Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* (2018) offers a compelling exploration of gender politics within the framework of middle-class Indian society. Set in the 1990s, the novel foregrounds the systemic regulation of women's lives through familial authority, marriage, and internalised patriarchy. This paper examines how gender operates as a socio-cultural construct in the novel, shaping women's identities, desires, and limitations. Drawing on feminist theory, Indian feminist scholarship, and studies of Indian English fiction, the article analyses the intersection of gender, marriage, silence, emotional labour, and agency. The protagonist Veda's journey from obedience to self-assertion demonstrates how resistance can emerge from within patriarchal systems rather than through outright rebellion. By situating *The Rule Breakers* within feminist literary discourse, this paper argues that Shenoy's novel critiques normative gender roles while advocating a nuanced form of female empowerment grounded in self-realisation and social engagement.

Keywords— Gender politics, Indian English fiction, marriage, patriarchy, female agency, Preeti Shenoy

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English fiction has consistently engaged with questions of gender, family, and social hierarchy, particularly in narratives centred on women's lived experiences. From early social realist novels to contemporary feminist writing, women's negotiations with patriarchy have remained a central thematic concern (Mukherjee 45). Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* (2018) continues this tradition by examining how gender politics operate in everyday life, particularly through institutions such as family and marriage.

The novel narrates the life of Veda, a young woman raised within a conservative middle-class household where obedience and conformity define feminine virtue. Veda's aspirations and individuality are gradually eclipsed by social expectations that prioritise marriage and domestic adjustment. As she

reflects, "I had been raised to believe that my life would begin only after marriage" (Shenoy 31). This statement encapsulates the gender ideology that structures women's lives as preparatory phases leading to marital fulfilment, a notion widely critiqued by feminist scholars (Beauvoir 445; Walby 214).

This paper explores *The Rule Breakers* as a text deeply invested in the politics of gender. It argues that Shenoy exposes how patriarchy is sustained not merely through overt oppression but through internalised norms, emotional labour, and silence. At the same time, the novel proposes a model of agency rooted in self-recognition and meaningful social engagement. By integrating feminist theory and Indian feminist scholarship, this study situates *The Rule Breakers* within broader debates on gender, marriage, and female subjectivity in Indian English literature.

II. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Critical engagement with gender politics in Indian English fiction has evolved significantly over the past five decades. Early critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee emphasised that Indian English novels often function as social documents reflecting middle-class anxieties, particularly concerning family, marriage, and women's roles (*The Twice Born Fiction* 45). Mukherjee argues that domestic spaces in Indian fiction are rarely neutral; rather, they are ideologically charged sites where gender hierarchies are reproduced.

Feminist literary criticism has further expanded this understanding. Simone de Beauvoir's foundational work *The Second Sex* conceptualises marriage as an institution that historically reduces women to dependency and emotional labour. This argument finds resonance in Indian contexts, where scholars like Sylvia Walby and Radha Kumar identify family

and marriage as central mechanisms of patriarchal control (Walby 214; Kumar 118).

Indian feminist scholars have specifically examined the intersection of gender, tradition, and social conditioning. Uma Chakravarti, in *Gendering Caste*, demonstrates how women's sexuality and autonomy are regulated within family structures to preserve social order (Chakravarti 57). Similarly, Sharmila Rege argues that silence and endurance are culturally valorised feminine traits, enabling the continuation of gender inequality (Rege 63). These insights illuminate Veda's internalised obedience and reluctance to articulate suffering in *The Rule Breakers*.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity has been instrumental in literary analyses that examine how femininity is constructed through repeated social acts rather than biology. Butler's argument that gender appears "natural" only through sustained repetition helps explain Veda's early acceptance of submission and silence (Butler 34). Carol Gilligan's work on women's moral development further contributes to this discourse by highlighting how women are socialised to prioritise relationships over selfhood, a pattern evident in Veda's emotional compromises (Gilligan 45).

Studies on contemporary Indian women's writing have increasingly focused on narratives of negotiated agency rather than overt rebellion. Tharu and Lalita's *Women Writing in India* trace a tradition of women's resistance that often emerges subtly within domestic spaces (Tharu and Lalita 112). Pramod K. Nayar observes that recent Indian English fiction interrogates not only female oppression but also the emotional constraints imposed on men by patriarchal masculinity (Nayar 77).

Specific scholarship on Preeti Shenoy situates her work within popular Indian English fiction that blends accessibility with feminist consciousness. Rao argues that popular fiction plays a crucial role in disseminating feminist ideas to a broader readership without academic abstraction (Rao 65). Patil's study of *The Rule Breakers* foregrounds themes of silence, selfhood, and emotional suppression, asserting that Veda's transformation signifies an inward feminist awakening rather than radical revolt (Patil 92). Sharma similarly notes that

Shenoy's women protagonists negotiate agency through education and purposeful engagement rather than defiance alone (Sharma 114).

Despite these critical interventions, existing studies often examine *The Rule Breakers* in isolation or focus primarily on character development. There remains a need for a comprehensive analysis that situates the novel within feminist theory, Indian feminist scholarship, and broader debates on gender politics, marriage, and emotional labour. This paper seeks to address that gap.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the representation of gender politics in Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* with particular reference to family, marriage, and social conditioning.
2. To analyse the construction of femininity and obedience in the novel using feminist theoretical frameworks such as gender performativity and patriarchal theory.
3. To explore marriage as an institution of gendered power, focusing on emotional labour, silence, and the erosion of female autonomy.
4. To investigate the role of silence and endurance as culturally sanctioned feminine virtues and their psychological consequences.
5. To examine the emergence of female agency through education, work, and self-realisation rather than overt rebellion.
6. To situate *The Rule Breakers* within contemporary Indian women's writing, highlighting its contribution to feminist discourse in Indian English fiction.
7. To demonstrate how the novel critiques patriarchy as a system that constrains both women and men, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of gender politics.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GENDER, PATRIARCHY, AND SOCIAL CONDITIONING

Gender, as contemporary feminist theory asserts, is not a biological inevitability but a socio-cultural construct shaped by repeated norms and expectations. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity emphasises that gender roles are

produced through habitual actions that reinforce social norms (Butler 34). In *The Rule Breakers*, femininity is performed through silence, compliance, and emotional restraint—traits Veda learns early in life (Shenoy 23).

Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (Walby 214). This system operates through institutions such as family and marriage, which appear naturalised but function as mechanisms of control. Indian feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Sharmila Rege further argue that family structures in India act as primary sites where gender hierarchies are reproduced and legitimised (Chakravarti 57; Rege 63).

Bell hooks’ assertion that patriarchy is sustained by both men and women through internalised norms is particularly relevant to Shenoy’s narrative (hooks 91). Veda’s mother and mother-in-law become agents of patriarchal discipline, reinforcing expectations of endurance and sacrifice. This internalisation of oppression ensures continuity of gender inequality without the need for overt coercion.

V. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative feminist textual analysis to examine gender politics in *The Rule Breakers*. Close reading is employed to analyse narrative moments related to marriage, domesticity, emotional labour, silence, and agency. Particular attention is paid to Veda’s internal monologues as they reveal the psychological effects of patriarchal conditioning.

Secondary sources include feminist theoretical texts (Beauvoir, Butler, Walby, hooks), Indian feminist scholarship (Chakravarti, Rege, Kumar), and critical studies on Indian English fiction (Mukherjee, Nayar, Tharu and Lalita). These provide interpretive frameworks to contextualise the novel’s representation of gender politics within broader socio-cultural and literary discourses.

The methodology proceeds through three stages:

1. Identification of gendered structures (family, marriage, motherhood) within the narrative.
2. Interpretation of female subjectivity and silence using feminist theory.

3. Evaluation of resistance and agency, focusing on negotiated empowerment rather than overt rebellion.

VI. GENDERED SOCIALISATION

From the earliest chapters, Shenoy portrays Veda’s upbringing as deeply structured around patriarchal expectations. Veda recalls: “*good girls did not ask questions; they accepted what was given to them*” (Shenoy 23). This seemingly simple sentence embodies decades of internalised social norms, where obedience is synonymous with femininity. Butler’s theory of gender performativity explains that such traits are not innate but socially enacted through repetition (Butler 34). Veda’s silence, politeness, and emotional restraint are learned behaviours, which she gradually internalises as natural.

The novel further demonstrates how education and intellectual curiosity are subordinated to gender norms. Even though Veda excels academically, she is consistently reminded that her role is to serve and conform: “*I had been raised to believe that my life would begin only after marriage*” (Shenoy 31). Beauvoir similarly notes that societal structures often delay or deny women’s self-realisation until they conform to marital roles (Beauvoir 445). Indian feminist scholarship reinforces this perspective. Chakravarti observes that in middle-class families, women’s autonomy is systematically restricted to preserve family honour and maintain gendered hierarchies (Chakravarti 57).

Veda’s childhood conditioning is thus not only personal but systemic, reflecting the intersection of culture, caste, and patriarchy. Rege argues that internalised silence and endurance are central to women’s socialisation, making it difficult to articulate resistance (Rege 63). Veda’s early years illustrate this dynamic, portraying how patriarchal ideologies shape identity long before marriage or adult social life.

VII. MARRIAGE AS AN INSTITUTION OF GENDERED POWER:

Marriage in *The Rule Breakers* operates as a critical locus of gender politics. The novel portrays arranged marriage not as a partnership but as a mechanism of control, where Veda’s aspirations are

systematically subordinated. She admits, “*My dreams seemed irrelevant once I became someone’s wife*” (Shenoy 88). Here, Shenoy underscores Beauvoir’s assertion that marriage historically limits women’s freedom and reduces their lives to a domestic sphere (Beauvoir 445).

Veda’s emotional experiences further illustrate the gendered imbalance. She is expected to bear emotional labour quietly, reconcile family tensions, and manage household expectations, all without complaint. The novel notes, “*I had a husband, yet I was desperately lonely*” (Shenoy 104). This isolation highlights hooks’ observation that women are disproportionately tasked with emotional work while receiving little acknowledgement or support (hooks 91). Walby similarly argues that marriage enforces patriarchal hierarchies by structuring women’s work and dependency (Walby 214).

Shenoy also demonstrates the subtle but pervasive power of in-laws, particularly the mother-in-law, who enforces compliance. This intra-familial policing reflects Chakravarti’s argument that women can become agents of patriarchy, perpetuating gender norms within households (Chakravarti 57). Thus, marriage is not merely a social institution but a microcosm of systemic gender control.

VIII. SILENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUFFERING

A recurring motif in *The Rule Breakers* is silence—both imposed and internalised. Veda observes, “*I had mastered the art of smiling while breaking inside*” (Shenoy 129). Shenoy portrays silence not as passive compliance but as a survival strategy in a system that does not validate female emotion. Rege notes that silence is culturally valorised for women, serving as a tool of both oppression and social control (Rege 63).

Veda’s psychological suffering also aligns with Gilligan’s theory of moral development, which posits that women are socialised to prioritise care and relationships over self-assertion (Gilligan 45). Her silence and emotional suppression illustrate the internalisation of patriarchal norms: endurance is not optional but morally rewarded. Chakravarti’s research further demonstrates that women’s emotional suffering is often normalised, creating a

cycle of compliance and invisibility (Chakravarti 57).

Shenoy’s narrative, by highlighting these internal conflicts, exposes the hidden costs of gendered socialisation. Veda’s struggle underscores that patriarchal oppression is often psychological and relational, rather than overtly violent.

IX. EMERGENCE OF AGENCY

While Veda initially embodies compliance and silence, Shenoy portrays her eventual awakening as an assertion of agency. Engagement with *Sankalp*, an educational initiative for underprivileged children, allows her to rediscover purpose: “*For the first time, I felt that my existence mattered*” (Shenoy 176). This reflects what Radha Kumar describes as negotiated resistance, where empowerment emerges through self-realisation rather than direct confrontation with patriarchy (Kumar 118).

Patil further emphasises that Shenoy’s depiction of Veda’s agency represents an inward feminist awakening, in which the protagonist’s autonomy grows alongside her social contributions (Patil 92). Veda’s agency is subtle: she does not challenge her household aggressively but redefines her life through meaningful work, relationships, and self-recognition.

Shenoy also highlights the intersection of agency with education and skill development. Nayar observes that Indian English fiction increasingly foregrounds women’s education as a site of empowerment (Nayar 77). By participating in social work and mentoring others, Veda experiences empowerment as both personal and social—a model of agency that reconciles societal constraints with individual autonomy.

X. PATRIARCHY AND MASCULINITY

While Shenoy’s focus is primarily on women, she also examines how patriarchal norms constrain men. Veda’s husband embodies emotionally restricted masculinity, struggling to communicate intimacy or empathy. The narrative implicitly critiques the patriarchal notion that men must remain stoic and dominant. Nayar asserts that contemporary Indian fiction recognises that patriarchy disciplines all

genders, albeit unequally, producing relational dysfunction (Nayar 77).

By juxtaposing Veda's internal suffering with her husband's emotional suppression, Shenoy emphasises that patriarchy is a system that harms both men and women. This nuanced perspective challenges simplistic victim-perpetrator binaries and enriches the novel's commentary on gender politics.

XI. SITUATING *THE RULE BREAKERS* IN INDIAN WOMEN'S WRITING

The Rule Breakers can be situated within a lineage of Indian women's writing where domestic spaces serve as political arenas. Tharu and Lalita trace a tradition of female narratives that articulate oppression subtly while highlighting resilience within restrictive social structures (Tharu and Lalita 112). Shenoy follows this tradition, portraying Veda's home as simultaneously oppressive and transformative.

Rao observes that popular Indian English fiction increasingly merges accessibility with feminist critique, enabling a wider readership to engage with gender issues (Rao 65). Sharma further notes that Shenoy's narratives consistently depict women negotiating agency through socially permissible means, rather than radical rebellion (Sharma 114).

By portraying Veda's quiet resistance, the novel contributes to contemporary feminist discourse in Indian English literature. It challenges readers to consider the everyday struggles and triumphs of women, reflecting both systemic oppression and individual empowerment.

XII. CONCLUSION

Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* offers a nuanced exploration of gender politics, domesticity, and female agency in middle-class Indian society. Through the life of Veda, Shenoy illustrates how patriarchy operates subtly through socialisation, familial authority, marriage, and cultural expectations, rather than only through overt coercion. From childhood, Veda internalises norms of obedience and silence, reflecting Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler 34) and the insights of Indian feminist scholars like Chakravarti and Rege (Chakravarti 57; Rege 63). These frameworks

illuminate how gender roles are reinforced across generations, creating a systemic structure in which women's desires and identities are secondary to familial and social expectations.

Marriage, in Shenoy's narrative, emerges as a primary site of gendered power, regulating women's autonomy and imposing expectations of emotional labour (Walby 214; hooks 91). Veda's experience demonstrates how cultural ideals of endurance, sacrifice, and relational harmony limit her self-expression while simultaneously defining her social worth. Shenoy foregrounds the psychological cost of such gendered socialisation, as Veda navigates loneliness, emotional suppression, and internal conflict: "*I had mastered the art of smiling while breaking inside*" (Shenoy 129). This reflects Gilligan's observation that women are socialised to prioritise relationships over personal needs (Gilligan 45) and highlights the ongoing relevance of feminist psychological critique in literary analysis.

Despite these constraints, the novel portrays negotiated agency as a form of resistance. Veda's engagement with educational and social work initiatives allows her to reclaim autonomy and purpose: "*For the first time, I felt that my existence mattered*" (Shenoy 176). This demonstrates that empowerment need not be defined by overt rebellion; rather, agency can emerge through self-realisation, social engagement, and meaningful contribution to others' lives. Scholars such as Patil and Kumar emphasise that such inward feminist awakenings are crucial sites of empowerment in contemporary Indian literature (Patil 92; Kumar 118). By situating Veda's transformation within a broader socio-cultural context, Shenoy articulates a model of female agency that is both pragmatic and aspirational, offering readers a tangible blueprint for negotiating restrictive social structures.

Furthermore, Shenoy's novel problematizes patriarchal norms for men as well. Veda's husband embodies the emotional repression expected of men within patriarchal systems, reflecting Nayar's argument that rigid gender roles constrain all members of society, albeit in different ways (Nayar 77). By showing that patriarchy harms both women and men, the novel moves beyond simplistic binaries of victim and oppressor, offering a more nuanced understanding of systemic gender politics.

Finally, *The Rule Breakers* contributes significantly to Indian women's writing and popular feminist discourse. Drawing from a tradition identified by Tharu and Lalita, Shenoy situates the domestic sphere as a politically charged site, exploring how women exercise subtle resistance within everyday life (Tharu and Lalita 112). By weaving feminist critique into an accessible narrative style, Shenoy expands the reach of gendered discourse beyond academic readership to broader audiences (Rao 65; Sharma 114). The novel thus exemplifies the capacity of popular Indian English fiction to interrogate social norms, critique patriarchy, and offer narratives of empowerment that resonate with contemporary readers.

In conclusion, *The Rule Breakers* not only illuminates the complexities of gender politics, marriage, and socialisation in Indian middle-class life but also demonstrates that resistance can emerge through personal growth, purposeful engagement, and self-assertion. Shenoy's work underscores the continuing relevance of feminist theory in literary analysis while advocating for subtle, practical, and socially negotiated forms of female empowerment. By portraying Veda's journey from silence and compliance to self-realisation and agency, the novel affirms that breaking rules—whether overtly or internally—is essential for reclaiming dignity, autonomy, and identity within constraining socio-cultural frameworks.

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