

## GETTING OVER LONELINESS: A STUDY OF “THE RULE BREAKERS” BY PREETI SHENOY

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### ABSTRACT

*Being a social animal, man needs to interact and associate with one another. The family, which is the fundamental pillar of society, plays an important role in shaping our personalities. Communication, support, sharing, caring and trust in one another enables in developing strong, healthy and secure relationships. Lack of it could have negative consequences thereby affecting the family members causing relationships to crumble down. The focus of the current study is on the protagonist, Veda, who is attempting to fit in with her new family. She enters her husband's home after saying goodbye to her loved ones anticipating the same warmth here. Her mother-in-law, constantly humiliates and torments her and her husband is in his own little world. Unable to fulfill her dreams and no one to share her feelings with, she is lonely and sad. Her freedom is curbed and she faces gender bias too. She finds a true friend in her neighbor and keeps herself busy by working along with her. She finds solace in teaching the underprivileged children. She is able to comprehend and support her husband who had been maintaining a distance with her all throughout. The present study focuses on the mental state of the protagonist and the transformation seen in her from a shy to a confident woman at the end.*

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**Keywords:** Loneliness, Relationships, Identity, Family, Gender.

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### Introduction

One of India's top five best-selling writers is Preeti Shenoy. She is a modernist writer whose works are highly engaging and primarily focus on family relationships, discovering oneself, parenting etc. She is also listed among the noteworthy Indian personalities by Forbes. Her works have been translated into several languages. Moreover, she is a blogger and has received numerous awards for her outstanding writing skills.

The present study focuses on the importance of healthy relationships within a family, examines the protagonist's mental state in the novel, and explores ways to overcome loneliness. Leo Tolstoy's novel Anna Karenina opens with the line: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." As we are all aware, healthy relationships are the basis of a contented family. The absence of it ruins the peace within the family, leading to its disintegration.

In the present novel, the protagonist, Veda, faces gender bias and discrimination at the hands of her very own family. She undergoes many adversities in her marital life too. Furthermore, she is forced to follow the age-old traditions, thereby curtailing her modernistic views. This kind of treatment meted out to

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this woman makes her highly depressed and lonely. However, complex situations only last for a while. Robert Schuller has rightly said, "Tough times don't last; tough people do." Veda, too, focuses on her interests, overcomes all the challenges, and rises as a strong and confident woman. Let us first closely examine this thought-provoking novel, "The Rule Breakers," by a contemporary Indian writer, Preeti Shenoy.

An orthodox family lived in the quiet little hilly Himalayan town of Joshimath. Rajvinder dwelled along with his wife and four children. The protagonist, Veda, was the eldest girl, followed by three younger girls and a boy. She was a bright, obedient, avid reader and an ambitious girl aspiring to be a professor at a university in Delhi. So, she put her heart and soul into academics and was always the class topper. She was well-liked in college by the faculty and students. Her father, an orthodox person, had other plans for her. He intended to get her married off at twenty and also set the condition that she could pursue her education until her marriage was finalised. She was unhappy with her father's decision.

Nevertheless, her mother taught her to respect her elders and never to question them, particularly a senior male family member like her father. Being a shy girl, too, she did not dare to confront her father and silently accepted the marriage proposal arranged by him. Her wedding was fixed to Bhuvan, an IT professional from Pune. Keeping her family's needs in mind, she set aside her dreams of being a professor and ended up marrying a total stranger in the third year of her graduation. She began a new phase of life at her in-laws' place in a tiny flat in the metropolitan city of Pune.

Interested in pursuing her dreams, Veda joined a college in Pune to resume her education. Soon after her arrival, her father-in-law expired and her mother-in-law blamed her for bringing ill luck to the family by not performing her religious duties. She was morose as she was constantly tormented by her mother-in-law's attitude, who mentally and physically abused her regularly. The responsibilities of marriage immensely burdened Veda. Moreover, she found it difficult to cope with the traditional views of her mother-in-law. Also, being the only married woman in her class, she was ostracized.

She needed to focus on academics but failed very badly in her final year. With no other alternative, Veda was forced to adapt to her new environment as her parents were reluctant to call her back as they believed it would bring a bad name to the family. Also, she had three younger sisters to be settled, and she never wanted to jeopardize their future marriage prospects. She was lonely as there was no one to support her. Her husband was in his own little world, paying no attention to her condition.

Veda felt that her dreams were dying a slow death. With each passing day, she felt like she was fading into oblivion. She was finding marriage and all the responsibilities that came with it an enormous burden to bear. She felt stifled, imprisoned, and suppressed. She saw no escape. It was a prison she had willingly stepped into. Now she was trapped. (TRB, pg. 79)

In this challenging situation, she found a true friend in Kanika, her neighbour, whom she accidentally met. Veda was impressed by her social service, and she too joined in helping the slum children in academics at Sankalp, a non-profit organization. At this juncture, she came across the bitter realities of life and witnessed the vast divide between the rich and the poor. Veda volunteered to help the underprivileged children here prepare for their board exams, thereby working toward their well-being. Having a clear purpose in life, Veda could now overlook her mother-in-law's taunts and focus on her work. With social interaction and engagement, Veda could now come out of her shell, devote her valuable time, and share knowledge with the kids.

Meanwhile, while cleaning the house, Veda discovered letters exchanged between Bhuvan and Vikram, his college friend. The secret relationship her husband and Vikram shared came to light, and Veda was heartbroken. However, she comforted herself, attempted to understand his situation, and did not try to convince him to return to her. Moreover, she tried to unite both of them. Nevertheless, her mother-in-law could not bear the reality that her loving son was gay.

Veda boldly decided to divorce Bhuvan and freed herself from the clutches of this unhappy marriage. Without any hesitation, she informed her parents about her decision. The protagonist moved out of her in-laws' house and, along with her friends Kanika and Ron, ended up opening a new institution and named it Rocket school. She shifted to the first floor of the school, living independently there.

We notice a tremendous transformation in Veda from a shy girl to a brave young woman at the novel's end. With a firm resolve, she boldly faces the world far from the controls of traditions and societal norms. Standing up for herself made her confident, enabling her to bounce back to her usual self. She is undoubtedly a true inspiration to individuals unable to lead peaceful lives due to gender discrimination, class, poverty, unhappy marriages, etc.

### Literature Review

People of all age groups experience loneliness at some point or the other in their lives. Loneliness can range from mild to severe cases and adversely affect physical and mental health outcomes. It disrupts the day-to-day life of the affected individual and, at times, has an impact on the people associated with them. Numerous aspects, like life changes, mental health issues, low self-esteem, and personality features, can contribute to this condition.

We learn about Veda's troubled mental state through numerous instances in the novel. She experienced pangs of loneliness, and she felt isolated throughout her marital life. Her mother-in-law and husband were solely responsible for her condition. Deprived of love and understanding, she lacked an intimate relationship with them. Her husband was not steadfast in this divine bond of marriage. Her mother-in-law frequently passed lewd remarks on her and made her carry out all the household chores without rest. Her spouse remained a mute spectator throughout this challenging phase of her life.

Moreover, Veda was considered a bad omen by her mother-in-law as she held her responsible for her father-in-laws' death. She was keen on eliminating the bad luck brought to the family. Veda was forced to perform certain rituals every morning to dispel the curse on the family. Mounted by domestic responsibilities, Veda lagged in academics. She attempted to express her mental agony, but her mother-in-law's temper silenced her voice. Veda was extremely frightened by her behaviour and tried to suppress her feelings. She silently obeyed her mother-in-law's instructions and avoided confrontation with her. Her mother-in-law only wanted her daughter-in-law to dance according to her tunes. Veda accepted her fate and suffered from within, with her dreams fading away with time. The mental agony undergone by Veda at her husband's place can be seen through the letters written to her sister, Vidya. She writes, "My mother-in-law thinks I am to blame for my father-in-law's death. I wish Bhuwan would stand up for me. He does not. I kind of feel alone." (Shenoy 80). She ultimately considers herself responsible for her father-in-law's death. Also, she pens, "I don't know what responsibility she wants me to take on. She decides everything that has to be cooked. I do whatever she tells me to do. What more she wants from me?" (Shenoy 71).

After her marriage to Bhuwan, the burning to accomplish her dream made her rejoin college. However, she was poorly treated there too. Her classmates shunned her friendship due to her marital status. She had no sense of belonging, even to the college community there. She felt isolated there too. Veda expressed her thoughts to her sister, saying, "I feel I am leading a dichotomous life. I am struggling to come to terms with being a married woman. Nobody else in my class was married, and they were shocked to discover I was. The way the girls screamed when they found the fact –it was like I have a disease or something. I felt embarrassed and self-conscious as they asked me many questions until one of them asked them to leave me alone and mind their own business." (Shenoy 68). All these situations severely affected her mental health, making her lonely and sad.

We can find happiness in little things. Veda found it in Sankalp, where she devoted herself wholeheartedly to her mission. Also, she decided to prioritise her happiness before her family's. Engaging herself in this good cause was a gratifying experience indeed. "When we have a problem, it seems significant, but when we face a bigger problem, the one we faced earlier looks so silly. That was how she felt. Things had changed a lot in the last few weeks." (TRB, pg. 313)

Best-selling author and life coach Rob Liano explains the practical importance of self-love by noting, "Once you embrace your value, talents, and strengths, it neutralises when others think less of you." This statement highlights the necessity of loving oneself practically. One's mental and emotional health is improved by pursuing self-appreciation, self-understanding, and mature self-love, which also increases one's capacity to improve the lives of others. (Fromm, 2006).

Loving oneself is a lifetime commitment to excel in ways that enable an individual to not only "find their voice" but to "help others to find theirs" (Covey, 2004, pp. 96-99). Veda, by focusing on herself, could not only discover her identity but also accomplish her desire to bring up underprivileged slum children. She thought about their welfare and strived hard toward the upliftment of the downtrodden children. She strongly felt that every individual has a right to be educated and live a contented life.

Veda boldly decided to divorce Bhuwan. Very happily, she declares that "Life has thrown all kinds of things at me, and I have grown as a person. I feel I have so much more compassion now- more than I did when I got married and moved to Pune." (TRB, pg. 317). She broke the rules of tradition and was liberated, enabling her to overcome feelings of frustration and isolation.

**Conclusion**

Indeed, life is filled with challenges but overpowering them courageously and changing every challenge into an opportunity is vital to lead a happy and meaningful life on this earth. The current study concludes that an investment in a supportive and friendly environment can get over emotions of loneliness, enabling one to lead a contented life. Additionally, one should not neglect their happiness. There is room for further research in pursuing identity, friendship, and other related areas.

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