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Women's Freedom and Restrictions in Preeti Shenoy's The Rule Breakers

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Abstract

In *The Rule Breakers*, Preeti Shenoy introduces one such girl turned a married woman who prefers to disregard the rules for the betterment of her own life. The concept of disregarding, disobeying or defying rules that are set by society or system is under much scrutiny in the contemporary period. Contemporary Indian women writers are not holding back in their efforts to explore the noncompliance of societal norms by the women they know or at least by the women they create. They are expressive in their views and agony through their writings in the post-independent era as they find enough reasons for their exclamations. Both patriarchy and imperialism are seen as possible yet different forms of domination over those who succumb voluntarily without any sort of resistance. Because of this, it is important for the experiences of women under the patriarchal control to come out to the foremost position and disclose the undue cruelty shown to them by conservative men in every sphere of their life. It is also important to the women to deny this male dominance over them. According to these authors the present-day women continue to re-define the rules of the class, community, and race.

Keywords: freedom, restriction, patriarchy, discriminations, women's problems

Introduction

There are some influences of globalization on the ideas of breaking the rules and liberation in the mind of women which throw a new light on the aspirations of modern women. Sometimes this influence leads to sweet experiences in their life and in some cases it is not. For some women rest of their lives goes smoothly without any kind of suffering or servile. But for majority of the women, it leads into pathetic situation where they are left with bitter experiences and rest of the life for them is worse than they predict. A significant diversion in ongoing Indian women's writing has been an illustration of internal life and unnoticeable interpersonal connections. However, in a culture where independence and objection have regularly kept away from the woman's thoughts and conjugal delight is shown as the only objective of life, the woman's role at home is always under scrutiny with more interest. Women in the recent times are progressively decisive, increasingly free from all societal barriers in their view and outspoken in their attitude than the woman of the earlier periods.

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Rules of the society are usually adoptable primarily because they provide a sense of security and uniformity. But one needs to step outside the chaos when it is existent and cause some damage to individual. A common issue that every woman is facing in every country is the question of woman, irrespective of the land or tradition they belong to, that hints at the women who are launching themselves. Lata Mishra, in her article “The Dynamics of Protest in Post- Independence Indian English Women Fiction” points out that.

Their women protagonists firmly refuse to become prisoners of orthodoxies, fossilized traditions, and stereo typically idealized identities. These fictionists cast a sharp look at the fissures in the structural dynamics of society, functioning to the disadvantage of the female of the species. Protest in women's fictional narrative articulates both the existence of the dominant power structure and the female desire to disavow and defy that structure. (206)

The modern woman today is not inclined to go by the traditional attributions, like 'angel in the house' and 'sexually voracious' images. She is essentially known for and conscious of the low position offered in the family and society. As a new woman she is reflective about any such predicament and intends to disprove and fight against the general, accepted norms and measures. What is significant about these women is that they are to deal with the consequences of their personal and professional choices. They do not only seek freedom outside their houses but within as well. The women characters are portrayed as rule breakers for their spirited fight against the existent norms of the society. The modern women in their pursuit for identity, individuality and liberty act and react in stringent ways to the established conventional structure.

The condition of Women in India

The Rule Breakers, a novel of Preeti Shenoy provides an outstanding Story with a soul-stirring experience. It provides an opportunity to the characters to speak their mind, as they have the courage to go for what they want and stand up for it. Many readers appreciate the book cover where the 'red dupatta' is considered as symbolic for defying the rules and consider it as the pictorial image of the rule breakers. The entire novel is divided into four parts: 'The Rules, Playing by The Rules, Bending the Rules and The Rule Breakers. Each part begins with appropriate and meaningful quotes about 'Rules'. Most of the characters in this novel are well portrayed which

makes one feel connected to them and give readers a strong message about life. Each part is significant for its content related rules of the society and their influence on various categories of people.

Preeti Shenoy describes the real-life situations which a woman confronts in all her life and how society expects the women to comply with certain norms. Her gripping narration provides the reader all the emotions that a woman undergoes in her life. One can experience anxiety, emotional, sorrow, pain, tragic, magical, laughter, mystery, and shocking moments within one's life while reading this novel. However, the novel surely amuses some readers as they happen to be 'Rule Breakers' or 'Rule Followers' in some part of their life or throughout. This novel peeps through those often negligible yet impact incidents where an individual wary about the norms or follow the norms.

The Rule Breakers is another significant novel of the author that discusses women issues though not from the feminist point of view. The name of the work suggests that it is coming straight from her stereotype templates. However, what brings fame to her stories among women crowd is the real enigma. Undoubtedly, she writes for majority of the women, except those few stories for other sections of the society. This work brings out the story of Veda - a girl from a small hilly town, Joshi-math. She is good and obedient. She has all the support of her parents. In a sudden manner, she gets married to a guy who hails from Pune. Her life changes soon after her entry into the city. In this city, she comes across some people and her incomplete story of freedom, friendship and romance gains new momentum and a new story takes its form. However, the episodes of the past and present that accounted for her story is what all the readers confront during their attempt to go through the narration. As it is already mentioned in the previous passages the chapters in the novel start with a quotation, giving direction to the readers on the possible content or context they are going to learn subsequently. The first chapter starts with the following lines and acts as a source for the author to reflect upon in the form of a story.

Though the continuation of this quotation is missing here, one can well get it just by searching the web sources. The lines "I will do what I have to do. And I will do what I must" are either intentionally or unintentionally left out by the author. However, the first line and the last line of the quote lead to some confu-

sion in following. It is true that rules and responsibilities are meant for binding the human beings together. Knowing the purpose of rules, one still wants to follow one's own ideas based on the necessity created by self. The tendency of going by rules is a phenomenon experienced by the masses, yet, here and there, few instances of self-driven individuals address this predisposition.

The first part of the novel, 'The Rules' starts in a small town Joshirmath and the historical name is otherwise is 'Jyothirmath' which was established by Sri Adi Sankaracharya, a saint in the eighth century on his visit to that place. The story initially revolves around the characters of the family chosen by the author where each one gets enough space to get introduced.

Their father, Rajinder, wasn't exactly a mid-tempered man. With four daughters and a son to look after, he ran his house with the precision of a military sergeant. Their pliant mother, Kamala, just went along with whatever their father decided. (12)

Her concern for studies never inspired Vidya as she preferred to engage herself in chatting with her friends all the time on Bollywood movies, cosmetics, and hairstyles. Somehow Veda created interest among the other in reading as she personally loves to read English classics, adventurous stories, historical and romantic fiction. She used to borrow books from her friends and library to read them back-to-back. Most of the stories she learned are meant for sharing with her siblings as bedtime stories, where the other elderly persons too join. They find the narratives are quite interesting and even her brother Anwesh is fond of listening to them always. The only exception here is Veda's father who is not inclined to listen to the stories shared by his daughter. He prefers to stay away by hooking up to television, watching sports or news, which is his favourite pastime activity. He always gives more attention to the progression of his son. The reason is evident, as he expresses, straightaway, with his daughters that they are going to marry someone and leave the house whereas, the son must find his livelihood once he grew up. What unsettles the protagonist is the constant observation of Suraj, who happens to be her college mate. When Vidya noticed that he is staring at her sister Veda, she understands that he likes her sister much. This is condemned by Veda during their talk on the same topic, though she likes such attention, feeling 'flattered' by that act. Vidya insists her sister to reveal her opinion on Suraj; she categorically sets the topic aside and never allows

her sister to probe further on the topic. Veda is well aware of the consequences, and she is not prepared for any such. Her crush on Suraj makes her more uncomfortable. She cautions her sister, too, on such affairs.

'Only heroines in books and movies can afford to do all that. Come on, you know my goals, and you know our situation at home. I just want to top my college. I don't have time for all this.' Veda was resolute. She did not want to think about Suraj. If their father found out, there would be a heavy price to pay. (18)

Here is where the psyche of the protagonist is revealed by the author that she doesn't want to break the norms that are followed or expected of her to comply. She tells her sister that such things happen only in movies not in real life. She informs her that her priority is her studies. She is not ready for love life, and she confirms that there is no place for Suraj in her life. Later she gets into a kind of situation where she must accept the request made by Suraj to meet him in the canteen for a cup of tea. She hesitatingly accepts and learns the tragic story of him that caused his study in that college. Suddenly, she realizes that she is late to join her sister who accompanies her on their return to home.

Discussion

The story moves back to Joshirmath where the sudden arrangements of Veda's marriage are on one side and Veda's dating with Suraj on the other side move parallel. Veda manages to meet Suraj after lot of introspection on attending the regular meeting calls given by Suraj. She feels happy to be in the presence of him. She even shares about her father's preparations for her marriage. All these things do not stop Suraj from taking further steps in establishing a close bond with Veda. In fact, they become so close that they go on long drives together without letting anyone aware of it.

Veda tells her everything and the resolution to carry the relationship further as friends. Vidya finds it as a better option if her sister approves and continues it. She asks 'what is wrong, Didi? (42). She encourages the idea of 'being friend' as her sister is not hiding anything from him. She has been upfront. She wishes that her sister should 'make the best of this'. She even comforts her by saying 'You should spend time with him if it makes you happy! You shouldn't be consumed by guilt over this,' (42). Finally, the days before marriage are on roll and the visit of Bhuwan only confirmed the final interaction between bride and groom. They spoke to each other privately ex-

changed their interest and hobbies. The date of marriage is announced by her father casually. There is another possible meeting Veda could have with Suraj, which has made the situation and talk heavy as both are not ready for the topic that forcefully entered their conversation.

When she spoke, she was clear. 'I can't, Suraj. All the arrangements are in progress. Papa has already spoken to a few people and has booked a marriage hall with great difficulty. He will be made to look like a fool if I say anything now. Everybody in the community will laugh at him. It's too late. This was one of his conditions, when he let me attend college. And in any case, all the girls in my family get married early. All my cousins got married before they were twenty-one. It is the norm. I can't break it. And based on what? Based on our friendship?' (53)

Two things that haunt her where she is unable to understand the life of a girl, who has been deprived of all that she wants to do or achieve in life. She is clueless on why she couldn't protest her marriage for the sake of Suraj. She is also unmindful of whatever she planned or dream of. She has not voiced her feelings ever with anybody. Though she never likes Suraj she confessed that to him. She wants to complete her under graduation and get a job in Delhi. She never admits that to her father or mother. She thinks that she has no courage to do all these things. She regrets for her passive attitude and for her inability to act strongly when needed.

At the beginning, the novel not only introduces Veda, but also highlights the rules or norms that drive the family life, especially the life of women in a society. There are many 'rules and responsibilities' that the readers observe in the first few chapters which are in accordance with the title as well as quotation used by the author. There are many rules that a girl must follow during her brought up by parents. She must obey the conditions set by the members of family. She is not allowed to talk to boys in her college as such may attract wrath of the parents as well as the college administration. As a girl or as a woman she is expected to comply with rules such not speaking against the wish of her parents, not indulging in games and sports that are open to boys, not having boyfriends, etc.

There are two letters that Veda writes after a fortnight stay in her in-law's house as she has already promised her sister on such communication before leaving Joshimath. She describes

each and everything that happened during the fifteen days in the not so large, yet an old complex building. She talks about all the three members of the family, father-in law, mother-in law and her husband. She also introduces her neighbor Shanta aunty, Kanti behen and the servant of the home Shakubai. What is significant to note from her letter is the comparison between the two places, here parental home and her in- law's home.

You know Vidya, when I was in Joshimath, I dreamed of escaping to the city. Remember how I used to long for it? But now that I am living in a city, I discover that I miss the mountains. Over there, I could step outside the house, and I would be in the garden, inhaling the fabulous cold, fresh air. I never thought that I would say this, but I miss the air in Joshimath. What an odd thing to miss, right? (60)

She goes on narrating each household works that she had in the house and how understanding Bhuwan was in encouraging her to study, etc. She elaborates the attitude of her mother in-law largely in the letter. She esquires about all in Joshimath and asks her sister to focus on studies. She even discloses how she and Bhuwan postponed the first night affair as she feels so nervous about it. She encloses another letter to Suraj and sends it in the same envelop, asking her sister to pass it to him. In her letter to Suraj, she speaks once again about the life in Joshimath and the concern to remain attached to the life that she before reaching Pune.

Life here is very different compared to how it was in Joshimath. (Of course, it was bound to be different. But I think I am surprised by how different.) ...I am the same person I was before I got married. But now, I am being made to feel like a 'married' woman. I am a married woman, I know. But that's not how I feel. I feel like the same Veda who is the eldest sister at home, who is Suraj's friend, and who is 'normal'. It's not that being married is abnormal in any way, but oh, it is so strange. (62)

Veda feels that she is leading a 'dichotomous life'. She is struggling to come to terms with the life as a married woman. Especially when she attends the college, she notices that very much. Nobody else in her class is married and all those who join her in the class are shocked to discover that she is married, as they don't expect someone studying after marriage. The way the girls screamed when they came to know the fact, as if they have seen someone utterly ill or suffering from a disease for long.

This gives Veda some kind of embarrassment and she is conscious in her effort when others asked her a lot of questions. However, there is a girl named Betty (Veda finds it strange to have such a name!) asks the rest to keep quiet and leave her alone. She is not preferred for any kind of discussions in the college.

The college life for Veda is not the same that she had in Joshimath. The status of being a married woman is something that she is forced to reckon with. There is an incident in her college where a boy asks her to join for coffee. Before she could answer or accepts, there is another who girl who intervenes and say that she can be left alone as she is married. Though Veda has no reason to say no to that boy who offered her coffee, yet she is not preferred based on her status of being a married woman. She considers that the status causes wariness to some, and at times acts as protection shield or perhaps a fence.

Her journey in college is also covered in her letters to Vidya who wishes to see her sister completes her education and get a degree. "Do not fall into this same trap that I have fallen into, Vidya. Please study hard and start working. Marriage sucks." (71)

Suddenly, the shocking death of her father in-law causes havoc and all she could see is her parents coming down to attend the occasion. But she is shocked to listen to the comments of her mother in-law that she brought bad luck to her home. This terribly upsets Veda, and it is further aggravated when she ill-treats her father. She tries to take the issue to her husband who pays a deaf ear and provides no solution. Later her mother in-law becomes vicious in her treatment and lays more conditions to Veda to follow. She is unable to counterattack as she never tried to deal anyone in her life in such a manner. She blames herself for not retaliating and wishes that she could be much stronger. However, her mother in-law's indifferent attitude continues with her though she never dares to question her.

All these happenings—it is because you aren't having a bath in the morning, and you are not lighting the lamp. You know the rituals, don't you? In your house, don't they do the puja? 'We do,' said Veda, trying to keep her voice steady. 'Then? You know that it must be done. Not once since you stepped into this house have you done the pooja. No wonder we got cursed. You'd better wake up at 5.30 a.m. from tomorrow. I will wake you when I get up. I don't want you lazing in bed. Have a shower and perform the pooja. Is that clear?'

Padma Devi glowered (75)

Life in Pune is more congenial to the protagonist, as she has been allowed to join Sankalp, where Kanika is working. She goes through the areas that are not seen before and meets people who are not in her acquaintance. She becomes active in the NGO affairs as a volunteer. She moves around the places related to the workplace with Ron and Kanika. Even for staying extra hours she gets the approval of her mother in-law and Bhuwan. What is interesting here is the conversation with her sister who updates her on the things that are happening in Joshimath. Her sister Vidya talks so bravely about her opinion on rules.

If I had dared break the 'rule', I would have probably been rewarded. But most women are so afraid to break out of the mould of societal acceptance. We have been taught to be obedient, sweet, and kind. The thing is breaking rules comes with a price. (In your case, it is facing the anger of Ma and Papa, being talked about, etc.) The reward for breaking the rules is not certain. Hence, most of us find it easier to not break rules and be 'good girls. (182)

The opinion of Vidya speaks more about adhering to the rules as a better option for the girls. She confirms that she is afraid to break the rules. Moreover, breaking the rules may yield nothing but anger from the parents or society. So, she prefers to stay by the rules rather forcing herself to break the rules. She is not sure of what she is going to achieve by denying or defying rules, what is the outcome of it. On the other hand, her sister claims that she wants to bend the rules as she no longer considers them suitable for happiness or for pursuing dreams. She describes few incidents in support of her statement. She tries to educate her sister on the need to bend the rules. She mentions the same in her letter as "I did it! I broke the rules. I met Suraj!" (184) and the way she ends her letter "Your rule bender sis (not a rule breaker)" (186).

What takes place in Pune is nothing but the efforts of the protagonist in bending the rules which are obstructing her progress. There are enough examples like her efforts to convince her mother in-law to adjust herself for the new role of her daughter in-law, taking the consent of her husband to continue her studies, taking into confidence the people around, especially Kanika and Ron. Suddenly, she notices change in her approach towards internal and external affairs where she experiences that she can manage with rules. Then she comes across the following thought-provoking line from her

sister Vidya in one of her letters.

Don't get me wrong, Didi-Ido admires you very much. But what I am reflecting on is how our parents and society in general view girls... The girls who do not protest and who obey the rules are rewarded. The rule breakers like me are punished. Why? Only because we dare to have our own wishes. Only because we dare have our own dreams? Who gives you a right to dream, Didi? Who takes it away? Isn't it outright alone? (179)

When Veda went out with Suraj and informs the same to Vidya, she feels elated for the fact that her finally her sister broke the 'rules' to listen to her inner self. She mentions the same in her reply. She even addresses her first time as 'Dearest, dearest rule breaker Didi,' and the news that her sister need not feel guilty as she conveyed about her meeting with an old friend. She is very happy that her sister went after one of the long pending desires.

The immature, yet a very bonding develops between Kajol and Sanju, whose brought up takes place simultaneously in the same locality. This is well understood by Kanika, Ron and Veda. They all attend a birthday party of Kajol who not only introduces her family conditions but also the cruel attitude of her who is drunkard. The pitiable thing to note here is how Kajol's father spoils the entire program as he is annoyed by the presence of Ron. He doesn't hold a good opinion on the foreigners as he feels that he is working like a slave in their companies for survival. He is always ill-treated by them when he is on job.

Apart from the one incident at the home of Kajol, the three also go in search of Sanju, who takes a wrong path to fetch the question papers for his upcoming exams. Sanju knows that the local gangsters are in the business of paper leaking and wishes that he could score well if the plan works. He ends up with severe beating from them and his whereabouts are also not known for some time until the three identify him in wagon of the nearest railway station. They take him to the hospital, but the doctors end up their efforts saying 'Sorry' as the internal damages are more severe than the external bruises.

'Can't you, of all people, see the problem here, Kanika? At least Ron and Veda can be excused, as they are new, and they may not be aware of the guidelines and rules. But an experienced person like you knows very well about Sankalp rules. You cannot visit them in their homes, and you cannot have them over at your home. You have violated our guidelines,

our basic rules. The rules have been put in place for a reason, are there for a reason. How could you do such a thing?' Aparna asked. (256)

The novel reveals a new twist in the life of Veda. As she is increasingly uncomfortable to continue to be with Bhuwan and not doing anything in the matter she sensed, she has decided to visit her home Joshimath. She asks Bhuwan to arrange a trip to her native town as it has been a long time since her marriage took place. He obliges and books a flight ticket to Veda, at the request of her to go alone. What is disclosed by the writer till here is the sexuality of Bhuwan. The protagonist is deprived of what she desires for as a young woman. She becomes successful in all her attempts to listen to her mind, but few things are not in her control as she realizes at the end of the novel. She felt jealousy when she heard about Suraj's new friend Priya. In the case of Bhuwan, she has no such ill feelings, rather kind enough to understand his feelings. Now she has to leave Bhuwan also.

In comparison to the problem of discovering Bhuwan's sexuality, and the aftermath of the showdown with the inquiry committee, Suraj and her relationship with him now seemed trivial to Veda. She thought about how the problems we face are only relative in nature, to one another. When we have a problem, it seems big and important. But when we face a bigger problem, the one we faced earlier seems so silly. That was how she felt. Things had changed such a lot in the last few weeks. (287)

She reaches Joshimath and the response is overwhelming and jubilant. Her entry caused excitement and commotion in and around the house. One by one, everyone in her family came out of the house to welcome her starting with Ani, her mother, Rudra kaka, Paro didi, Vaish, Vidya, Vandu and lastly her father. Then they all hugged each other, one after the other, exclaiming in happiness, 'asking many questions all at once'. Soon after reaching Pune, Veda writes a letter to her sister Vidya that she is ok and going to file divorce papers soon. She says that it is a decision of Bhuwan as well as herself. She feels so happy for taking such a decision and more joyous because she is taking decisions on her own. She is happy to continue her association with Bhuwan as a friend. With the help of Kanika, she transforms it into a best one to live, and it allows her to stay close to the children they are going to teach. Even Ron is expected to move into same floor as they converted the floor and

calls it as 'quarters. She even says that the affair with Suraj is a closed chapter in her life as she is no more interested to join him in any role. She understands that by the time she is writing this letter, both Suraj and Priya would have become a couple.

Yes, I was in love with him at one point of time. But my circumstances were very different then...We all change, Vidya. Things happen to us, and we change as people [...] I have lost Suraj and I have also lost Bhuwan. But I have found myself. That is priceless. If there is one thing I have learned from my experiences, it is this-speak your mind. Have the courage to go for what you want and stand up for it. (294)

The protagonist admits finally that she is a changed human being now. She grew up with time and only learned that she could live one her own. She feels that she is much stronger than what she was earlier. She is no more dependent on someone to guide her or dictate her. She is free from such conditions. She is free from the troublesome experiences of the past. She encourages her sister to listen to her own mind, not anyone else. However, in the case of Veda, the protagonist of the novel, it works for achieving long pending goal of becoming a teacher, becoming free from the unhappy married life. The author projects her viewpoint through her skillful narration, by not allowing any criticism either on the characters directly or on their actions indirectly. What can be noticed in the novel is the amazing skills of the author and her flawless writing skills. In their article "Michael Foucault's Notion of 'Identity' and 'Liberation': A Study in Preeti Shenoy's Rule Breakers", Dr. Partha Sarathi Mandal and Mousumi Kundu rightly highlights the tendencies of the rule breakers:

One who breaks the rules is marked as a disobedient fellow. People are habituated to look at the normative patterns that are followed by most of the people without thinking of its utility. However, few are left to violate the norms in a very deliberate way. Those who go against the so-called norms are undoubtedly, get rid of the fear of being outcast and the shackles of the rules. They are desperate enough to protest the structured form. Therefore, those people are not always seeking freedom to commit any wrong deed, rather sometimes they are the pioneer of any virtuous act. (55)

Conclusion

Preeti Shenoy indicates not on one occasion, but in many, the idea of liberating one's own

self from the social clutches. She views that 'rule breakers' are desperate enough to cross the boundaries and limitations that entangle the human beings in the society. The practice of following the rules and breaking the rules has been continuing from the earlier centuries, though the number of rule breakers is noticeably few. However, if the rule breaker is a girl or a woman, the uproar is louder than anything else. Probably what matters for the rule breaker is the strong reason behind the attempt where the successful achievement of goals or dreams is high priority. In this novel the author is far more successful in making the readers understand the narration on these lines, without entertaining other conclusions. In *Rule Breakers* Veda's character embodies feminist themes through her defiance of societal norms and traditional expectations. She challenges established gender roles by pursuing her ambitions and asserting her right to live on her own terms. Veda's journey highlights the struggle for gender equality and the courage required to break free from oppressive conventions, demonstrating the feminist ideals of self-determination and empowerment.

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