

The Nexus of Trauma and Memory in the Genesis of Bipolar Disorder in

Preeti Shenoy's *Life Is What You Make It*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the psychoanalytic components that comprise trauma and memory in Preeti Shenoy's work of fiction, *Life Is What You Make It*, focusing on the relationship between repression and its reemergence. With an emphasis on Freudian theories, the research explores how suppressed memories affect the characters' identities, exacerbating their current circumstances and highlighting the effects of bipolar disorder in the novel. Bipolar disorder is a chronic mental illness, and it occurs in recurrent phases of mania and depression. It disrupts a person's ability to think rationally and triggers sudden shifts in their state of mind and energy. The psychoanalytic approach highlights Shenoy's depiction of memory as a

tool for acknowledging and reconciling with the past to obtain an understanding of the perennial nature of trauma and its consequences.

Keywords: Psychology, Repression, Trauma, Memory, Bipolar disorder.

Preet Shenoy is a prominent author and artist; her writings focus on self-discovery, and also analyse the complex patterns of love, family, friendship and mental well-being. Since the publication of her first book, *34 Bubblegums and Candies* (2008), and her debut novel, *Life Is What You Make It* (2011), her literary career has grown tremendously, with seventeen books published now under her name. Shenoy stands herself out from her contemporary writers by tackling realistic social issues, relationship conflicts and inner trauma. Her writings integrate the emotional landscape of common people, particularly women, to produce a narrative that is both approachable and critically pertinent. She possesses several talents. She is an artist as well as a writer, with a focus on illustrated journals and portraits. Numerous magazines have featured her poetry and short stories. She has given speeches at several prestigious educational institutions and organisations, including IIT, IIM, ISRO, Infosys, and others. In her novel, *Life Is What You Make It*, Shenoy attempts to address an issue that is considered taboo and unspoken in society and is frequently disregarded and ignored by people. Through this novel, she raises awareness about the importance of taking care of one's mental health and how bipolar disorder's psychological effects can alter a person's life.

The fundamental basis for psychoanalytic theory is the interplay between conscious and unconscious mental processes. The objective of psychoanalysis is to examine or analyse neurosis, which is the outcome of an internal dispute that occurs when specific unconscious desires are suppressed,

unable to find a means of expression, and impede an individual's ability to function normally in daily life.

The Austrian neurologist, Sigmund Freud has developed the psychoanalytic theory in the 20th century.

Psychoanalysis has gained popularity following the publication of Freud's 'Studies on Hysteria' (1895), 'The Interpretation of Dreams' (1900), 'The Psychopathology of Everyday Life' (1901), 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905), and 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920).

Freud proposes the concept of the unconscious, as it greatly influences the mental state; also, it is the most crucial aspect to study in order to understand the underlying causes of behaviour. He has developed two notions— hidden meaning and repression—from the theory of the unconscious. Certain thoughts or recollections that cause anxiety can be forgotten or repressed into the unconscious through the process of repression. During this step, the patient denies and rejects conscious depictions of unpleasant ideas, pictures, and memories since they conflict with the ego. In accordance with Freud's theory, "Repression is the fundamental technique people use to allay anxiety caused by conflicts.....In terms of psychic energy, repression is an expensive defence mechanism. The unconscious memories or urges continue to seek expression and may emerge in the form of accidents, slips or neurotic symptoms" (Morgan 588).

The study explores the complex inner worlds of Ankita Sharma, who is diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and analyses how she overcomes it with resilience and fortitude. In addition to addressing her mental illness, the research will examine the psychoanalytical aspects and the themes of trauma, repression, and identity. Bipolar disorder is a chronic, complex, and frequently misdiagnosed condition that can have adverse impacts on an individual's health, feelings of self-worth, and way of life. Austin Mardon states that "Bipolar disorder, previously referred to as manic depression, is a chronic mental disorder that creates sporadic and unpredictable changes in mood, energy and concentration" (Mardon 1).

Preeti Shenoy's *Life is What You Make It* covers a number of themes, such as love, mental disorders, trauma, rehabilitation, therapy, and cultural expectations. The narrative revolves around Ankita, the protagonist, her ambitions, relationship conflicts, inner struggle, and fortitude in overcoming the disorder. The importance of accepting oneself and how decisions affect one's course of life are both highlighted in the work. Ankita Sharma is a talented and aspirational girl who wants to pursue an MBA and strives to excel in her studies. Despite having accomplished her goals, she ends up in a mental health facility due to an unexpected turn in her life.

The narrative focuses on Ankita Sharma, who lives in Kerala with her parents and falls in love with Vaibhav during her school years. After schooling, both Ankita and Vaibhav depart to pursue higher education at respected colleges. Following that, they correspond with each other through letters. Then Abhishek enters her life, falls deeply in love with her, and they commence a new relationship. Though staying in this relationship makes her think of betraying Vaibhav, Ankita still continues to be in the relationship because of Abhishek's intense love towards her. However, when she has made the decision to relocate to Bombay in order to join her MBA program, Abhishek is not able to accept her departure and takes his own life.

Adolescent behaviour patterns are shaped by childhood or past events. People are driven by unconscious disputes, anxiety, guilt, and desires. They are afraid of being controlled by them; thus, they do not want to learn more about them. This continues to occur until people figure out how to recognise and comprehend the true source of it. Here, Ankita, unable to accept his death, eventually develops bipolar disorder, a mental illness marked by periods of mood swings that range from high manic episodes to depressive phases. At first, the signs and symptoms of the disorder are not extremely severe, but they might progress to the point that the patient is forced to consider suicide, and occasionally they do attempt it.

When Abhishek asks her to stay with him, Ankita declines his proposal of marriage, saying, “How could I promise? How could I tell him that my dreams had grown beyond the town of Cochin?” (Shenoy 75). Had she attempted to console and make him understand in a better way, he wouldn't have made the decision to commit suicide. When Ankita learns about Abhishek's death, she feels devastated and deeply disturbed since she believes she is to blame for his demise. She regrets, “I wished I had told him that I would keep in touch” (Shenoy 79). She represses her emotions and lacks the courage to recollect them.

Sigmund Freud attempts to categorise bipolar illness using the psychodynamic approach in his seminal work, *Mourning and Melancholia*. According to his classifications, a psychological reaction to loss is the root cause of the disorder. He distinguishes between mourning, a conscious reaction marked by grief, and melancholia, a form of pathological depression, offering a conceptual framework that separates the two emotional states associated with bipolar disease.

Freud states that, “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (Freud 243), whereas he describes melancholia as “The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (Freud 244). Here, Ankita experiences mourning as she has lost her loved one, Abhishek, whereas she endures melancholia as she has no control over her mind, which puts her into a depressive state and even leads her to suicidal thoughts.

Manic episodes are characterised by more than solely mood swings. They must also exhibit some of the following symptoms to a substantial level to be diagnosed with a manic episode: elevated self-esteem, decreased need for sleep, rapid thought processes, higher levels of activity, struggle to make decisions, and psychotic symptoms. Here, Ankita experiences all of these symptoms during her mania.

Ankita puts lots of effort into her studies as she finds her management course engaging. But having been affected by bipolar disorder, she experiences an abrupt shift in her state of mind and energy levels; occasionally, she reaches a high-energy episode during which her inventiveness is at its greatest. For instance, memorising the entire chapter, running a marathon, taking copious amounts of detailed notes, reading an endless number of books, etc., still she feels hollow and craves more to do. She even creates notes using various coloured pens and distributes them to other students to study. She undergoes manic episodes that prohibit her from sleeping, and she loses control over her emotions, and also experiences physical tiredness. She employs writing as a form of therapy at this time, expressing her rushing ideas in poetry that covers everything from mundane topics to fantasies. She appears normal and energetic on the surface, but on the inner side, she undergoes a transformation. She often displays her feelings of unworthiness as “I feel down and depressed. I feel worthless” (Shenoy 133).

Ankita accepts her friend Joseph's confession of love even though she doesn't feel anything towards him. Because in Joseph's place, she can feel more than Abhishek at that precise instant. She expresses her longing as, “I was aching for Abhi. It was a longing which I had not allowed myself to feel” (Shenoy 102). This incident demonstrates how she suppresses her feelings and desires for Abhishek and hides them by appearing normal.

As Ankita battles with bipolar disorder, her mental health keeps getting worse. She has anxiety episodes due to an overwhelming, unreasonable fear, which her parents mistakenly believe is caused by stress from her challenging MBA course. Ankita's depression phases emerge when her parents discover and destroy the letters of Vaibhav and Abhishek, which she has concealed in her room. She expresses, "Something inside me had died that day, along with those letters...Perhaps it was a part of my soul" (Shenoy 120). Her body and mind are exhausted due to sleep deprivation and physical tiredness. She struggles with anxiety and hopelessness, and eventually, she can no longer handle her internal conflict. And in an effort to alleviate the psychological suffering, she attempts to take her own life, thinking physical pain is much better than her inner turmoil.

Ankita has lost a significant amount of weight due to her reduced appetite during her melancholy state. It is difficult for those who are depressed to finish daily tasks. Their lack of motivation and energy makes it harder for them to succeed at work or at home. Ankita used to be conscientious about keeping her room neat, but now she has no interest and leaves the room messy. Moreover, a common symptom of depression is less communication, slow activity, and difficulties in thinking. Ankita's situation is similar since she is unable to write or read basic sentences and finding hard to understand them.

Following a failed attempt at suicide, she is brought to the psychiatrist, who diagnoses her with symptoms of depression and provides a prescription for medication. When her mental health doesn't improve, her parents choose to consult with Dr Madhusudan, a new psychiatrist. He diagnoses bipolar disorder and treats her with more attention and care. She has given a number of therapies in the hospital, and she is progressively improving. After the treatment, Ankita decides to enrol in a creative writing course instead of proceeding with her MBA programme. In addition to treatment, family members and friends' emotional support—which includes conversational support and reappraisal—helps people

overcome the trauma and the condition. Also, one has to believe in oneself, and one's self-esteem leads them to start a new beginning. Ankita's evolving perspective throughout the narrative demonstrates her psychological growth and how her experiences have shaped her perception of life and her personality.

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