
**Desire, Marriage, and Self-Discovery: A Critical Study of *The Secret Wish List*
By Preeti Shenoy**

Ms. V. Janapriya¹

I -M.A. English, Department of English, Muthayammal College of Arts and Science,
Rasipuram

&

Dr. A. Manjula² M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.,

Assistant professor, Department of English, Muthayammal College of Arts and Science,
Rasipuram.

Mail Id: manjua6896@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical analysis of the novel *The Secret Wish List* by Preeti Shenoy as an important example of contemporary Indian English romantic fiction. Published in 2012, the novel explores the emotional struggles of a married woman who attempts to rediscover her identity within the limitations imposed by marriage and social expectations. Through an examination of the narrative structure, themes, characterization, and cultural context, this study argues that the novel goes beyond popular romance to address deeper issues such as marital dissatisfaction, gender roles, emotional neglect, and personal autonomy. By portraying the psychological journey of its protagonist, the novel reflects the evolving position of women in urban Indian society. The paper further situates the work within the broader development of contemporary Indian commercial fiction and highlights its relevance in discussions of feminine identity and emotional fulfilment.

Keywords: Personal Autonomy, Romance, Marriage, Psychological Journey, Self Identity.

Literature has long functioned as a reflection of human emotions, social values, and cultural transformation. In contemporary Indian English literature, many writers have begun to explore themes related to relationships, identity, and the changing dynamics of family life. One of the prominent authors contributing to this literary development is Preeti Shenoy, whose novels focus on everyday experiences and emotional realities of modern individuals. Among her works, *The Secret Wish List* occupies a distinctive place because it deals with the

psychological and emotional conflicts of a married woman seeking meaning beyond domestic routine. Unlike conventional romance novels that idealize love and marriage, this novel presents a more complex portrayal of marital life, revealing how emotional neglect and unfulfilled desires can lead to inner conflict.

The narrative follows the life of Diksha, a woman who finds herself trapped in a monotonous marriage that lacks emotional intimacy. Through her journey, the novel explores themes of desire, guilt, freedom, and self-discovery. The story raises significant questions about whether personal happiness can coexist with social expectations and whether individuals can redefine their identity within restrictive circumstances. By examining these issues, the novel reflects the struggles of many women in contemporary urban India who attempt to balance traditional roles with personal aspirations. Thus, *The Secret Wish List* can be read not merely as entertainment but as a commentary on the emotional complexities of modern marriage and the search for individual fulfilment.

The narrative of *The Secret Wish List* revolves around the life of Diksha, whose romantic experiences begin during her teenage years. However, when her family discovers her relationship with a boyfriend, her freedom is abruptly curtailed and she is married at the age of nineteen to Sandeep, a man chosen by her family. This early marriage marks the beginning of a life shaped largely by social expectations rather than personal choice.

Although Sandeep provides financial stability and fulfils his responsibilities as a husband, he remains emotionally distant and conservative in his outlook. His approach to marriage reflects traditional patriarchal values in which the husband's role is primarily associated with providing security, while emotional intimacy is often neglected. As a result, Diksha gradually begins to experience feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction despite the outward stability of her life. Years later, Diksha reconnects with Vibhor, a former acquaintance from her college days. Vibhor represents a contrast to her husband's personality. He is expressive, supportive, and emotionally attentive. Through his encouragement, Diksha begins to confront the desires and ambitions that she had long suppressed. It is during this stage that she creates a "secret wish list," a personal list of experiences and dreams she wishes to fulfil.

The wish list functions as an important symbolic device in the narrative. It represents Diksha's attempt to reclaim control over her life and to rediscover aspects of her identity that had been overshadowed by domestic responsibilities. Each item on the list signifies a small act of personal freedom and emotional exploration. The process of fulfilling these wishes also leads Diksha into a morally complex situation. Her growing emotional connection with Vibhor introduces the possibility of infidelity, forcing her to confront feelings of guilt and confusion. The novel does not portray this relationship as purely romantic or glamorous;

instead, it highlights the psychological consequences of emotional attachment outside marriage. Through this conflict, the narrative raises important questions about the nature of commitment and the emotional needs of individuals within relationships. Diksha's actions are not presented as a simple rebellion against marriage but as an expression of her search for emotional validation and personal recognition.

Another significant aspect of the novel is its exploration of gender roles within Indian society. Diksha initially embodies the traditional expectations placed upon married women: obedience, sacrifice, and dedication to family responsibilities. Over time, however, she begins to question these expectations and attempts to assert her individuality. This transformation reflects broader social changes occurring in urban India, where women increasingly seek independence and personal fulfilment while still navigating cultural traditions. The novel therefore captures the tension between modern aspirations and conventional norms. From a psychological perspective, the story also examines the emotional consequences of suppressed desires. Diksha's dissatisfaction is not solely the result of external circumstances but also stems from her inability to express her feelings openly. The wish list becomes a therapeutic tool that allows her to articulate her inner frustrations and desires.

Shenoy's narrative style plays an important role in conveying these emotional experiences. The novel is written in simple and accessible language, which enables readers to connect easily with the protagonist's thoughts and feelings. The use of first-person narration allows the audience to observe Diksha's internal conflicts closely, making her journey of self-discovery more intimate and relatable. Although the plot includes elements typical of romantic fiction, the emotional complexity of the characters adds depth to the story. Diksha is portrayed not as a perfect heroine but as a flawed individual struggling to reconcile personal desires with moral responsibility. Similarly, Sandeep is not depicted as a villain but as a product of traditional values, highlighting how cultural expectations shape behaviour. The popularity of *The Secret Wish List* also reflects the growing influence of commercial fiction in India. Writers such as Preeti Shenoy have expanded the readership of English literature by addressing relatable themes and presenting narratives in an engaging style. While some critics argue that such novels lack literary sophistication, their widespread appeal demonstrates their cultural relevance.

The novel's exploration of marital dissatisfaction and female self-identity has attracted academic interest in recent years. Scholars have noted that the story presents a subtle critique of patriarchal structures while emphasizing the importance of emotional equality in relationships. By focusing on the internal struggles of a married woman, the novel contributes to broader discussions about gender dynamics and personal autonomy.

The Secret Wish List represents a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English popular fiction. Through the character of Diksha, Preeti Shenoy explores the emotional complexities of marriage, the pressures of social expectations, and the universal desire for personal fulfilment. The novel demonstrates that financial stability alone cannot guarantee happiness within relationships. Emotional communication, mutual understanding, and personal freedom are equally essential components of a meaningful partnership. Diksha's journey of self-discovery highlights the importance of acknowledging one's desires while also recognizing the ethical consequences of personal choices.

Although written in a simple narrative style, the novel raises profound questions about identity, autonomy, and the evolving role of women in modern society. By presenting marriage not as a fixed institution but as a dynamic relationship shaped by emotional needs, the novel encourages readers to reflect on the meaning of commitment and individuality. *The Secret Wish List* illustrates that the search for self-identity is a continuous process. The story suggests that true fulfilment can only be achieved when individuals confront their inner conflicts and strive for honesty in their relationships. In this way, the novel transcends the boundaries of conventional romance and offers a thoughtful exploration of desire, marriage, and self-realization.

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