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## **Michael Foucault's Notion of 'Identity' and 'Liberation': A Study in Preeti Shenoy's *Rule Breakers***

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### **Abstract:**

The struggle of modern 'identity' focuses on a person's social relation such as spatial identity, racial identity, gender identity and religious identity. There is no fixed identity and the formation of 'identity' is in process. The concept of multiple identities has already been popularized in the contemporary era. Michael Foucault, the postmodern philosopher has developed his idea of 'identity' through his observation on the liberation from social relation. The title of the book, *Rule Breakers* by a contemporary female novelist, Preeti Shenoy connotes the idea of liberation from the social clutches. Rule breakers are desperate enough to cross the limitations and boundaries that entangle the social beings. The practice of rule breaking has been continuing from earlier centuries, though the number is few. However, it is noticeable, if the rule breaker is a girl or a woman. In the present article, an attempt has been made to show how Preeti Shenoy's Veda, a female protagonist of *Rule Breakers* searches for a new space in her life. Another endeavor is to show how much this quest is related to Michael Foucault's notion of 'identity' and 'liberation'.

**Keywords: Identity; Liberation; Postmodern; Rule Breakers; Social clutches.**

According to Michel Foucault,

“The main interest in life is to become someone else that you were not at the beginning. . . . The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end.” (Sawicki, 286)

## Introduction:

Who am I? Am I the same person as I was few years ago? These two questions focus on the identity of human being that is fluid and flexible according to its context. An individual identity is socially constructed such as gender identity, religious identity, family identity, professional identity and marital status. Despite those identities sometimes people are seeking for the identities that are free from the social clutches. Such earnest quest is observed when people are found in the labyrinth of socio-cultural dogma. It is a very hard job to alienate one's 'identity' from one's 'self'. Michael Foucault popularized the identity game and he put emphasis on the 'third person'. Michael Foucault has developed his idea of 'identity' through his observation on the liberation from social relation. The title of the book *Rule Breakers* by a contemporary female novelist, Preeti Shenoy connotes the idea of liberation from the social clutches. Rule breakers are desperate enough to cross the limitations and boundaries that entangle the social beings. The practice of rule breaking has been continuing from earlier centuries, though the number is few. However, it is noticeable, if the rule breaker is a girl or a woman. In the present article an attempt has been made to show how Preeti Shenoy's Veda, a female protagonist of *Rule Breakers* searches for a new space in her life. Another endeavor is to show how much this quest is related to the 'identity game' of Michael Foucault, the Post-modern philosopher.

The struggle of modern 'identity' focuses on a person's social relation such as spatial identity, racial identity, gender identity and religious identity. In *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy it is found that the 'identity' is given and the social affiliation determines the 'identity' of a person. The religious factors are highly significant in *Things Fall Apart* and in *The God of Small Things*. 'Identity' in the postmodern era has become much more fluid and flexible. It puts emphasis on the psychology of an individual and the inner state of a person. "As modernity has progressed into postmodernity, identity has become even more unstable, even more a question without a definite answer" (Baldil 83). There is no fixed 'identity' and the formation of 'identity' is in process.

### **Problem of Identity:**

The concept of multiple identities has already been popularized in the contemporary era. An individual identity is fluid and flexible in relation to its determiner factors such as migrant culture, religion, caste and gender. Therefore, no such obligation should be there to fix up the activities of an individual. Women are not the subject to follow certain act what her society demands. Feminist criticism, according to Foucault, “will separate out from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think . . . it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and as wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom” (Foucault 46). Crisis comes out, when the desire and actions do not match. Desire comes from the heart and mind of the individual, whereas, actions are sometimes performed due to social obligations.

In these cases, people have to go against the call of the heart or against the rules of the society or authority. In both the cases a common conflict is raised. This common matter is termed as violation; firstly, it is the violation of self desire, secondly, it is the violation of the norm. On the other hand, disobeying the norm when people follow the call of the heart, they become liberal and outcast. According to Foucault, Freedom takes shelter “at the heart of human actions” (Paul Patton 266). Freedom “refers to the area within which a person can act without obstruction or interference by others” (Paul Patton 261). When people follow the rules and regulations, they become obedient and frustrated. According to Paul Patton “a person may be frustrated in the fulfillment of their desires as much by lack of access to resources as by explicit or even tacit prohibitions on certain kinds of behaviour.” (Paul Patton 261).

### **Power and freedom:**

We think of freedom in terms of self-realization, he argues, <sup>1</sup>then we plainly have something which can fail for inner reasons as well as because of external obstacles. We can fail to achieve our own self-realization through inner fears, or false consciousness, as well as because of external coercion.” (Paul Patton 263)

Two kinds of obstacle prevent people to do what they desire to do. Firstly, it is external or social obligations and secondly, it is internal or inner fears and false-consciousness. However,

sometimes the self-realization wins over those two boundaries and invites a new world of liberation and freedom. People, thus, get rid of the shackles of limitations. Therefore, it is a journey through domination and power; and it is journey towards liberation and power. Very few people among the living human beings dare to undertake the voyage towards the violation of the norm. They are called rule breakers. In Preeti Shenoy's novel *Rule Breakers*, Veda the protagonist has undertaken the journey towards liberation.

***Rule Breakers* by Preeti Shenoy:**

“Is this all there was to a girl's life? Get married and leave the home you have known all your life? What was she getting into? Why had not she listened to Suraj and protested? Why didn't she have the courage to stand up for herself, and express what she wanted?” (Shenoy 54)

Veda, the female protagonist in the fiction, *Rule Breakers* by Preeti Shenoy raises those questions in her mind, and she realizes the passive and stagnant state of her existent. Those words can easily be studied from the feminist point of view. It can be interpreted as a voice of a woman. It can be analyzed from the aspect of the suffering state and oppression of women in the social institution like marriage. It may also be the fact that the voice of a girl is seized by the loud established voices of the society or patriarchal family. The mother character says, “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” (Shenoy 51). However, one thing is very much clear that the said girl or woman is not happy with what is going on against her will. Another thing must be the oral rules and obligations formed by the patriarchal society where the action and words are determined by the gender identity. Preeti Shenoy has portrayed the discrimination of gender in a very explicit way.

‘Why can't I get a job and work, Papa? Why should only Animesh have that privilege?’ Veda wanted to ask. But she had been taught by her mother to never talk back to her elders, especially to her father. It was disrespectful, she was told. So she and her sisters would silently listen to her father's rants. (Shenoy 9)

### **Concept 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 the 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.

Departing from this traditional view, Morrison (2006) introduced a construct termed pro-social rule breaking (PSRB) to explain rule breaking that is not motivated by negative intentions toward the organization. PSRB is defined as “any instance where an employee intentionally violates a formal organizational policy, regulation, or prohibition with the primary intention of promoting the welfare of the organization or one of its stakeholders”. (Morrison 6)

They all possess the revolutionary spirit to cross the limitations. The rules and the limitations are drawn in accordance with the traditional or cultural values of any cast or gender. During Renaissance in India Raja Rammohan, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar showed the path of development and during national movement Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and Gandhiji broke the boundaries to make the country free from the colonial rulers. All these are the instances of good jobs of the rule breakers. It is also noticed that the rule breakers are involved in any anti-social activity. According to Preeti Shenoy’ Veda in *Rule Breakers*,

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. The reward for breaking the rules is not certain. Hence, most of us find it easier to not break rules and be ‘good girls’. (Shenoy 193)

One thing is very common in that matter that all rule breakers are independent thinkers and all they possess revolutionary spirit to go against the shackles of rules and regulations. Those people are seeking for 'freedom' and 'liberation'. The role of gender is determined in accordance with the gender identity. The dresses, the words, and the activities of the women are framed or structured by the people of the society. The same thing happens in case of a man. Therefore, the movements of male and female are fixed within a certain boundary. If one is found to do something against the norm, one is marked as a rule breaker. Our identities are also created in accordance with our social affiliations such as gender identity, religious identity, professional identity and the cultural identity. Thus, if people are found to go beyond the limitations of such identities, they lack the sense of belongingness. Therefore, they face one kind of identity crisis. Another vital issue is to look into the psychology of the individual. There are two questions. Firstly, does he or she agree willingly to follow the normative rules? Secondly, what does his or her mind want? If they two unite, people become happy. If a gap is found between the desire and the action, people suffer from crisis to have a personal space. Here in the novel that very gap is very much clear when Veda shares her personal experience. The novelist narrates, "What terrified Veda was the slow realization that she simply did not have it in her to stand up to the bullying. She was a gutless wimp with no backbone at all (Shenoy 90).

The very title, *Rule Breakers* focuses on the successful attempt of the female protagonist, Veda who crosses all the boundaries and limitations. These are not merely physical boundaries. Still, these are much more powerful than any physical boundary. It is actually the set of belief, deeply rooted in the minds of human beings, coming from generation after generations. All those socio-cultural and religious clutches determine what people should do. Those shackles don't care for the happiness and suffering of any male and female, rather people show fingers if someone violates the norm. Sometimes they show their fire eyes, if anybody gets rid of the fetters. Veda in *Rule Breakers*, denies all those obligations slowly and steadily to occupy her own space or 'identity' in her life.

The novel highlights the suffocating state of a woman in her marriage life. Veda says "Here I feel suffocated, but I guess I will get used to it" (Shenoy 57). A sudden marriage disrupts her education, destroys her career, and finishes her dreams.

‘I ...I don’t want to get married, Ma. I don’t want any boy to see me,’ she protested meekly. (Shenoy 21)

“‘Ma, you know I want to study, and I want to get job in a city. You know that is my dream,’ Veda continued to protest.” (Shenoy 22)

It compels her to take care of the members of her in-law family and to do all household activities. “This is my life, I am describing. I live this reality every single day. I am carrying out all the tasks that she asks me to, like a slave. I am crying as I write this” (Shenoy 92). Finding no space for her own, she struggles to cope up with the situation. Whenever she tries to add some meaning in her state of meaninglessness, her mother-in-law stands in front of the way. “As long as I follow all the rules laid down by my MIL, I am okay. She doesn’t get angry. If I dare break any of her ‘rules’, she gets nasty” (Shenoy 96). Somehow, she manages to get involved in a job place. Her mother-in-law is not the only barrier in her liberation. Her conservative mind also prevents her to cross certain boundaries. “I am afraid. I am terrified to break the rules (Shenoy 194). She never thinks of talking and of meeting with her childhood boyfriend, as she is a wife of someone else. Despite her unhappy sex life and suffocating marriage life she hesitates to cross the so-called norms. Finally, she breaks the rules and she meets with her childhood boyfriend, Suraj.

The wife who respects the marriage bonding, feels herself disloyal, if she meets with another man secretly. Unfortunately, the wife comes to know the secret love of her husband. The third person of her family is none other than a male. The thing is revealed that her husband is a guy. Heterosexual relationship is normative and accepted easily by the society, whereas homosexual relationship is not allowed. This is one of the fetters that Veda crosses, when she divorces her husband; and she makes her husband and his male friend free, despite the limitations of the normative rules in the society. Veda says “I am separating from Bhuwan and we will be filling for a divorce soon. It is a decision we made jointly, and you can’t imagine what a relief it is, to be making your own decisions about whether you want to stay in a marriage or not” (Shenoy 317). The story ends with Veda’s liberation from the marriage bond and her aim towards an ‘identity’ of her own. Throughout the novel, the reader faces all the fetters and all her efforts to get rid of.



When I think about it, 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 learnt from my experiences, it is this –speak your mind. Have the courage to go for what you want and stand up for it. (Shenoy 321)

Apart from its feminist aspect, the novel can be studied in the light of identity. 'Identity' is socially constructed. Sometimes 'identity' is based on relationship, sometimes on race, class and gender. 'Identity' is flexible. Veda, at the beginning of the novel, is not the same Veda, who finds liberation at the end. Apart from this external socially imposed identity, people possess other self identities that conflict with other established identities. Despite being a daughter, a wife and a mother, she is after all a woman, a female, and a human being. Veda becomes tired of performing her duties and obligations as a daughter, and as a wife. "I wondered for a while if I am being caught in a circle of self-pity. I tried to look at the bright side. I have food to eat; I have a roof over my head, etc., which thousands of people don't. But I had all these things before I left Joshimath too. And there I had you, and I had Vidya" (Shenoy 94). Finally, she finds 'a new identity'. "But I have found myself. That is priceless" (Shenoy 321). She welcomes the freedom. Her quest for liberation from the social relation is akin to the 'identity game' of Michael Foucault.

**Note:**

1. Taylor, 'What's wrong with negative liberty?', p. 212

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