



## **Breaking the Chains: Exploring Empowerment and Agency in Preeti Shenoy's *Rule Breakers***

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**Abstract:**

*This research paper investigates the thematic core of Preeti Shenoy's Rule Breakers, focusing on the protagonist Veda's transformative journey from compliance to resistance within the rigid framework of Indian patriarchal norms. The study seeks to unravel the complexities of gender, identity, and agency as portrayed in the narrative.*

*Trans-Deconstruction Theory on Monism (T2M) provides a lens to deconstruct and subsequently reconstruct the binaries present in Veda's experiences, such as conformity vs. rebellion, individuality vs. societal expectations, and tradition vs. modernity. By revealing the inherent interconnectedness of these opposing forces, T2M showcases how they collectively influence Veda's progression toward self-realization and empowerment. This holistic approach challenges the traditional notion of binary oppositions, instead presenting Veda's journey as a dynamic and interdependent process of negotiation and growth.*

*The Theory of Interpretations (TI) enriches the analysis by embracing the multiplicity of meanings*

*embedded within Veda's choices, struggles, and victories. It highlights how her journey resonates across diverse contexts, offering feminist, existentialist, and socio-cultural readings. This multiplicity underscores the novel's layered critique of patriarchal systems while emphasizing Veda's individuality as a microcosm of broader societal challenges faced by women in contemporary India.*

*This study contributes significantly to feminist literary discourse by employing T2M and TI to analyze Shenoy's work, thus offering fresh insights into the resilience and agency of women navigating traditional frameworks. It illuminates how resistance is intricately tied to the very structures it seeks to dismantle, portraying empowerment as an ongoing and multifaceted process. Ultimately, the paper asserts that Rule Breakers transcends a simple feminist narrative, instead offering a richly textured exploration of gender dynamics and self-empowerment in Indian society.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Patriarchy, Self-Empowerment, Trans-Deconstruction, Theory of Interpretations



## Introduction :

Preeti Shenoy's *Rule Breakers* offers a compelling exploration of the challenges faced by women bound by traditional societal norms in India. At its heart lies the story of Veda, a young woman whose life is dictated by the expectations of a conservative small-town community. Her dreams of pursuing higher education and building an independent career are abruptly curtailed when she is coerced into an arranged marriage. In her new role as a wife and daughter-in-law, Veda finds herself trapped in a cycle of duties and expectations, where her identity and aspirations are subordinated to the needs of her family and society.

The legal age for marriage in India is eighteen for women and twentyone for men. In 2001, 94 per cent of all women in the country were married by the time they were twenty-five years old. Furthermore, 44 per cent of these women got married when they were under the age of eighteen. (*The Rule Breakers, Preeti Shenoy*)

Shenoy highlights the tension between legal statutes and social realities in India. In *Rule Breakers*, she notes that while the legal age for marriage is eighteen for women and twenty-one for men, 'in 2001, 94 per cent of all women in the country were married by the time they were twenty-five years old. Furthermore, 44 per cent of these women got married when they were under the age of eighteen'

The novel resonates deeply with themes of gender inequality, the suppression of individuality, and the quest for agency. Shenoy deftly portrays how patriarchal systems not only limit women's autonomy but also impose an emotional and psychological toll on their sense of self. Yet, within this oppressive framework, *Rule Breakers* also reveals the potential for resistance and self-empowerment. Through Veda's struggles, Shenoy articulates the universal desire for freedom and self-expression, making the narrative both culturally specific and universally relevant.



This paper seeks to unravel the intricacies of Veda's journey. T2M offers a lens to examine the dynamic interplay of opposing forces in the novel, such as tradition vs. modernity and individual ambition vs. communal expectations. These binaries, often perceived as mutually exclusive, are deconstructed and reconfigured to reveal their interconnectedness. By highlighting how these forces interact to shape Veda's identity and choices, T2M enables a deeper understanding of the nuanced ways in which women navigate patriarchal systems.

Complementing this approach, the Theory of Interpretations (TI) emphasizes the multiplicity of meanings that can be derived from Veda's narrative. Her journey can be interpreted as an individual act of defiance against societal norms, a broader critique of gender inequality in Indian culture, or even an existential quest for self-realization. TI underscores the complexity of empowerment, showing that it is neither a linear process nor a one-dimensional concept but a multifaceted negotiation of internal desires and external constraints.

The objectives of this study are threefold:

- To highlight Preeti Shenoy's critique of entrenched gender norms and the systemic inequalities that define women's lives in traditional Indian settings.
- To demonstrate the relevance of T2M and TI in feminist literary studies, particularly in analyzing narratives that explore the tension between individuality and societal expectations.
- To offer fresh insights into the portrayal of empowerment in Indian literature, emphasizing how resistance and resilience are intricately intertwined.

Through this analysis, the paper seeks to showcase how *Rule Breakers* transcends conventional feminist narratives, providing a richly layered exploration of gender, identity, and agency. By situating Veda's personal struggles within the broader socio-cultural context of contemporary India, Shenoy invites readers to reflect on the ongoing negotiation between



tradition and modernity, offering a powerful commentary on the evolving role of women in society.

The methodology outlines an innovative approach to literary analysis through the combined use of Trans-Deconstruction (Theory on Monism, T2M) and the Theory of Interpretations (TI).

### 1. Trans-Deconstruction and Theory of Interpretations

- Trans-Deconstruction (T2M): This theory shifts away from traditional deconstruction, which typically focuses on the dismantling of binary oppositions (e.g., good/evil, male/female, tradition/rebellion). Instead, T2M emphasizes monism, or the idea that seemingly contradictory elements are interconnected, often in ways that are not immediately apparent. Rather than simply breaking down binaries, this theory aims to reconstruct these oppositions, offering a more holistic understanding. By focusing on their dynamic interdependence, T2M encourages readers to see both the unity and tension between opposing forces, leading to a deeper understanding of the narrative. This approach could be especially powerful when analyzing themes like tradition versus rebellion or conformity versus individuality, as it acknowledges the interplay between these forces rather than positioning them as separate or antagonistic.

- Theory of Interpretations (TI): The TI framework is based on the idea that a text has multiple, coexisting meanings, shaped by a variety of factors—cultural, historical, and individual contexts. TI encourages an approach that acknowledges the polysemy (multiple meanings) inherent in literature. In doing so, it allows readers to engage with texts in a way that fosters diverse interpretations, broadening their understanding. This aligns with postmodern approaches to literary criticism, where the meaning of a text is seen as fluid and dependent on the reader's perspective, thus rejecting a singular, objective interpretation. TI highlights the importance of contextual factors, such as the social, cultural, and personal

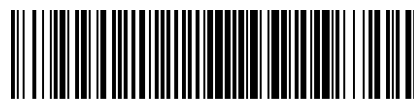


circumstances surrounding the text's creation and reception, further enriching the reader's experience.

## 2. Approach to Textual Analysis

The methodology involves a qualitative, interpretive approach to textual analysis, focusing on the complexity of meaning within a text. The following steps guide this process:

- **Step 1: Identifying and deconstructing binaries using T2M:** The first step is to apply T2M to identify and critically examine key binary oppositions within the text, such as tradition versus rebellion or conformity versus individuality. Instead of simply breaking these binaries apart, the analysis focuses on their interrelationship, showing how each side may inform or influence the other. This step helps reveal the complexity of the text's thematic undercurrents.
- **Step 2: Examining Veda's experiences through TI:** In this step, the focus shifts to the character of Veda, exploring how her experiences are multidimensional and can be interpreted in various ways depending on the reader's perspective. The aim is to explore how Veda's journey reflects the broader cultural, historical, and personal dynamics that shape the text's interpretation. By applying TI, readers are encouraged to consider how different contexts (e.g., gender, societal expectations, personal history) might offer multiple readings of her experiences.
- **Step 3: Synthesizing findings to highlight the feminist critique:** The final step synthesizes the previous analyses, focusing on the novel's feminist critique of patriarchal norms. The intersection of binaries (such as male/female or tradition/rebellion) within the narrative, combined with the multiplicity of interpretations of Veda's experiences, points to a deeper, feminist reading of the text. This feminist critique challenges the traditional, patriarchal structures that govern the characters' lives and calls attention to the complexity and richness of the gender dynamics at play.



By using these frameworks, the study offers a holistic and nuanced approach to textual analysis that recognizes the richness of meaning in literary works, emphasizing not just the deconstruction of binary oppositions, but their reconstruction in ways that reveal unity and interdependence. This process invites readers to engage with the text on a deeper level, embracing a multiplicity of interpretations and fostering a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of the narrative.

Veda's journey and the broader themes are explored through her character. Let's break down the key points further, using Trans-Deconstruction (T2M) and Theory of Interpretations (TI) to deepen our understanding of the complexities in her narrative.

#### Patriarchal Constraints: Tradition vs. Modernity

Veda's life is deeply shaped by the traditional gender roles of her society, which confine her to a role centered on family and domesticity. These roles expect women to suppress their desires for personal achievement in favor of fulfilling patriarchal obligations like marriage, motherhood, and obedience. Her arranged marriage symbolizes the external imposition of these societal norms.

From a T2M perspective, Veda's initial compliance with these constraints isn't merely passive submission but an integral part of her developmental journey. Rather than viewing her conformity as a sign of weakness or submission, T2M suggests that her early acceptance of patriarchal structures forms a critical foundation for her eventual rebellion. The tension between tradition and modernity—symbolized by the societal expectation of submission and Veda's internal desire for autonomy—is not an opposition of two isolated elements, but rather a dynamic interrelationship that fuels Veda's growth. This interdependence means that Veda's oppression is not just a force that stifles her, but also something that drives her towards greater agency.

#### Catalysts for Change: Rebellion and Solidarity



Veda's transformation begins when she asserts her individuality, initially through small acts of rebellion, such as pursuing a teaching career and questioning societal norms. These acts represent a challenge to the patriarchal structures that have dictated her life thus far. Rebellion, in this case, is not a simple rejection of the old ways, but a complex reconfiguration of her identity and desires in relation to the societal constraints.

Her rebellion is further supported and enhanced by the solidarity she finds with other women, particularly those who have defied traditional roles. These women serve as both role models and allies, providing Veda with the strength to challenge the norms she has always known. The support network among women becomes a crucial element in her journey toward empowerment, illustrating how collective action can dismantle oppressive structures.

#### Empowerment as a Process: Agency and Self-Realization

As Veda gains confidence, she begins to exercise her agency more decisively, making choices that align with her own desires rather than societal expectations. This empowerment is not a sudden occurrence but a gradual process of self-realization, marked by both progress and setbacks.

TI allows for multiple interpretations of Veda's empowerment. It can be seen as a feminist act of resistance against patriarchal oppression, an existential quest for self-discovery, or a socio-cultural negotiation of identity in a changing society. Each of these interpretations adds depth to the understanding of her journey, highlighting the complexity of empowerment as a multifaceted phenomenon.

#### Negotiating Identity: Tradition and Individuality

Veda's journey involves a constant negotiation between her traditional identity and her evolving individuality. She must find a way to honor her cultural heritage while also asserting her right to self-determination. This negotiation is often fraught with conflict, both internal and external, as she faces resistance from her family and community.



T2M helps to understand that tradition and individuality are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are interconnected forces that shape Veda's identity. Her ability to navigate this tension demonstrates the possibility of integrating tradition with personal aspirations, creating a new, hybrid identity that is both rooted in her culture and expressive of her individuality.

#### Conclusion

Through the character of Veda, *Rule Breakers* offers a nuanced exploration of the complexities of gender, identity, and agency in contemporary India. By examining the interplay of opposing forces—submission and resistance, tradition and individuality, oppression and agency—this study offers a more complex and holistic view of women's lives. Veda's journey becomes a testament to the resilience of women as they navigate societal constraints, demonstrating how they can redefine their identities in the face of adversity.

Rules and responsibilities: these are the ties that bind us. We do what we do, because of who we are. If we did otherwise, we would not be ourselves. (*Preeti Shenoy, The Rule Breakers*)

In conclusion, *Rule Breakers* not only offers a critique of patriarchal norms but also serves as a celebration of the strength and agency of women in their pursuit of autonomy and self-realization. Through the use of T2M and TI, this study has highlighted the intricate relationship between tradition and rebellion, providing a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender and identity in contemporary Indian society. Veda's story is a powerful reflection of the ongoing evolution of feminist thought and the broader societal changes taking place, making it an important contribution to both feminist literature and cultural discourse.



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