

Exploring Indian Womanhood: Blending Cultures in Shinie Antony's *The Girl Who Couldn't Love* and Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the depiction of Indian womanhood through the perspective of cultural hybridity in two modern Indian English novels: Shinie Antony's *The Girl Who Couldn't Love* (2017) and Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* (2018). Both novels feature female protagonists who challenge patriarchal norms in India after liberalization, as they adopt distinct strategies leading to different outcomes. In Antony's narrative, Rudrakshi (Roo) achieves independence through emotional detachment and repudiation of romantic and familial traditions, shaped by childhood trauma and resulting in solitude. Conversely, Shenoy's main character Veda seeks education, professional freedom, and inclusive ideals, thereby reshaping family dynamics and asserting her agency. This comparative study argues that contemporary Indian women authors are diversifying literary representations of femininity. These narratives go beyond the one-dimensional idea of the self-sacrificing Indian wife and mother to show how the clash of tradition and modernity can lead to either deep internal conflict or powerful social change.

.Keywords: Indian womanhood, cultural hybridity, gender resistance, Post-liberalization India, situated feminisms, emotional autonomy

Modern Indian English literature has progressed beyond conventional depictions of women as perpetually self-sacrificing wives and mothers. Rather than simplistic portrayals, it centres on complex female characters who confront traditional patriarchal norms, colonial legacies, and global modernity. Shinie Antony's *The Girl Who Couldn't Love* and Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* explore this change through the main characters who defy gender norms in different ways. Antony's narrative depicts a quiet, internalised form of resistance expressed through emotional detachment, whereas Shenoy's work highlights active rebellion through education, self-assurance, and social involvement.

This negotiation of cultural hybridity is shaped based on the post-independence experience in India. Women in India actively seek equilibrium between traditional rituals and their personal definitions of happiness. Literary scholars frequently describe this experience as walking a fine line between societal expectations and personal aspirations—a precarious position that can either offer liberation or cause alienation. Antony and Shenoy contribute to this discourse by centring characters who inhabit these contradictions. Roo's story echoes earlier confessional modes through its examination of familial trauma and emotional detachment, whereas Veda's narrative traces a journey from small-town constraints in the 1990s to self-discovery through education and advocacy for inclusivity.

This paper explores how contemporary Indian women's literature expands conceptions of femininity by contrasting the figures of the solitary rebel and the rule breaker. Both protagonists subvert traditional gender roles through their methods of resistance that differ at a fundamental level. The study examines how cultural hybridity-blending traditional Indian values with modern global influences-creates both challenges and opportunities for women's empowerment and self-expression, while emphasising the need for resistance forms rooted in Indian contexts rather than solely relying on Western feminist theories, enriching the discourse on gender, identity, and representation in Indian literature amidst globalisation. This approach resonates with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's notion of feminism without borders in the work *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, which urges feminist inquiry grounded in local contexts, considering factors such as class, caste, and region.

Recent research underscores the influence of urban-rural migration and internal movement on the formation of hybrid identities. In this framework, these studies maintain their pertinence by capturing the intricacies of identity, belonging, and cultural evolution in today's society.

The theoretical lens for this study draws on Homi K. Bhabha's ideas of cultural hybridity and the third space in his work, *The Location of Culture*, where identities in postcolonial contexts emerge through cultural interaction and negotiation rather than opposition. For Indian women, femininity is constructed through constant negotiation between traditional domestic roles and modern ideals of personal freedom influenced by Western thought. Bhabha's concept of edge-living aptly captures the experiences of the protagonists, who exist between familial obligations and individual ambitions. Antony's characters experience internal, psychological resistance, whereas Shenoy's heroines embody visible, hopeful empowerment through education and activism. This contrast highlights cultural hybridity as a source of tension and a catalyst for new identities and forms of resistance.

Contemporary Indian English literature by women is emerging as a significant arena for re-examining and altering established notions of gender. These literary works frequently integrate aspects of Indian cultural heritage with concepts derived from international feminist discourse. Starting from the 1980s, writers like Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy have depicted female characters navigating the challenges of reconciling their customary duties with emerging opportunities for autonomy and personal fulfilment. As these women grapple with societal expectations, their journeys frequently result in either profound internal psychological struggles or decisive acts of personal transformation. Through these narratives, these authors offer insights into the evolving gender dynamics in India, while simultaneously emphasising the influence of factors such as class, region and caste on women's lives and decisions.

Antony's writing aligns with this wider tradition by offering clear, sharp and often darkly humorous exploration of urban family life, as well as the complicated thoughts about love and relationships. Her work, *The Girl Who Couldn't Love*, offers an honest and unfiltered portrayal of dysfunctional relationships and emotional distance. Through this portrayal, the novel questions the social expectation that women must naturally desire marriage and heterosexual relationships, particularly in the context of middle-class Indian society.

Preeti Shenoy, employs a storytelling approach that is both easier to understand and inspiring. Her stories frequently centre on female protagonists who transition from circumstances of constraint or subjugation to a state of self-assurance and personal actualisation. The book *The Rule Breakers* depicts the challenges of patriarchy in rural India in the 1990s, while simultaneously highlighting the significance of educational attainment, individual development, and broader acceptance of varied identities and sexual orientations.

Shenoy's approach reflects a common arc in contemporary Indian women's literature, where characters overcome social and cultural limitations to assert their autonomy. For instance, a character in Shenoy's novel *The Rule Breakers* states, "I was trapped in the silent shadows of tradition, but I found my voice not by breaking away violently, but by understanding my own worth." [p.g:361]. This quote represents the gradual development of empowerment and outward transformation typical of Shenoy's

storytelling style. The protagonist's growing self-assurance is reflected in changing social interactions and life decisions, showing a reclamation of autonomy within the existing societal frameworks.

In contrast, Antony's depiction of female resistance departs from this external model of empowerment. Instead of overt social defiance, her characters engage in internal struggles where rebellion emerges through introspection and emotional turmoil. One character confides that the real fight was not in the streets or through loud protests; it was in the quiet battles within the mind, where each thought was a struggle between fear and hope. This highlights the subtle and often concealed nature of feminist resistance in Antony's work, prioritising psychological complexity over visible confrontation.

Together, these distinct narrative approaches enrich feminist discourse in Indian women's literature: Shenoy emphasises the visible transformation and active societal participation, while Antony explores the intricate inner changes that drive personal growth. Both perspectives offer valuable insights into how women today negotiate identity, trauma, and empowerment in contemporary India.

In modern Indian women's literature, the exploration of themes such as psychological trauma, gender consciousness, and self-realisation has become prominent, particularly through the works of authors like Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair. Shenoy's writing fits into this trend by incorporating feminist ideas and discussions about women's empowerment into mainstream popular fiction, making these critical conversations accessible to a wider audience. Her narratives often chart a transformative journey wherein female characters being constrained by emotional, social, or cultural limitations and gradually emerge as confident, independent individuals. This trajectory reflects a broader pattern observed in twenty-first-century Indian women's writing, where characters move from being trapped in suffering and oppression to gaining strength and control over their lives.

In *The Girl Who Couldn't Love*, Shinie Antony presents a poignant exploration of emotional trauma and quiet defiance through the character of Roo, a middle-aged English teacher who deliberately avoids conventional relationships. Roo's life is deeply affected by childhood wounds and a pervasive sense of abandonment, which influences her adult decisions. Living with her partially sighted mother in a small coastal town, Roo deliberately rejects societal norms, particularly the traditional expectations of marriage and family that often define a woman's identity in patriarchal cultures.

From the outset, Roo embodies a form of resistance that is subtle yet profound. She doesn't openly challenge social structures or try to change them through big actions. Instead, she expresses her dissatisfaction by choosing to live by her own rules, rejecting the belief that a woman's value depends on her being a wife or mother. Roo realises that freedom exists not in the relationship we seek, but in the spaces we choose to preserve. Her words "people think a woman alone must be lonely; they never imagine she might be free" [p.g:112] - encapsulates her quiet rebellion against the pressures imposed by tradition.

Antony's narrative technique further enhances our understanding of Roo's internal world. The novel employs a brief, sharp, and ironic first-person voice that mirrors Roo's emotional detachment and self-control. This style effectively conveys her scepticism toward intimacy and her guarded approach to relationships, shaped by early disappointments. Roo's voice is often laced with a biting sarcasm, revealing her resentment and lingering feeling of shame. She admits, "I choose distance because closeness always came with a price." [p.g:67].

Throughout the novel, Antony challenges the pervasive social expectation that women must seek intimacy and marriage to find meaning and fulfilment. Roo's brief and ultimately unsuccessful romantic relationship strengthens her belief that closeness brings pain rather than comfort. Her experiences question the norm that equates womanhood with emotional dependency. As she muses, every time she reached out for a relationship, she found only emptiness or betrayal, so she decided it was perhaps better to remain emotionally untouched.

In essence *The Girl Who Couldn't Love* offers a deep portrayal of feminine resistance that is psychological and internal rather than political or social. Roo's journey highlights how trauma can

influence an individual's choices and how resistance can take the form of emotional restraint and self-protection. Antony's work expands feminist discourse by exploring the complexities of women's inner lives and their quiet battles against the often invisible forces of patriarchal expectation.

Cultural hybridity appears as a tension between traditional roles and modern independence. Instead of trying to balance these opposing forces, Roo opts for solitude, asserting her agency while also experiencing psychological strain. By blaming social structures rather than herself, she challenges the norms of a patriarchy. The novel also highlights the emotional cost of such resistance and the difficulties women face in today's Indian society.

Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* portrays Veda as a proactive and hopeful form of resistance. Set in a 1990s hill town, Veda, the eldest of five siblings, refuses to marry young and instead pursues higher education with a desire to have a career in journalism. To her, education is a path to gain her independence. Her journey is gradual and realistic, shaped by financial struggles and social criticism. Besides her own personal development, Veda also challenges social norms by supporting her husband's same-sex relationship, reflecting a progressive yet empathetic form of feminism rooted in family values.

Cultural hybridity is exhibited in a positive light, as tradition and modernity work together to shape her development. Unlike Roo's internal withdrawal, Veda resists through her actions and relationships, encouraging changes within her, her family, and society. Her journey from restriction to independence highlights both the challenges and possibilities of women's empowerment within the Indian social context.

Together, these novels offer two distinct and complementary portrayals of Indian womanhood shaped by cultural hybridity. Both protagonists reject the notion that a woman's identity is limited to being a wife and mother roles. Roo's resistance is solitary and internal, giving her a sense of autonomy at the expense of intimacy, while Veda's path is more socially engaged and transformative, fostering empowerment through education and activism.

The contrast between the two novels becomes clearer when looking at how their protagonists respond to social expectations. In *The Girl Who Couldn't Love* by Shinie Antony, resistance takes an inward form. The protagonist deals with social pressure by emotionally withdrawing from relationships. In her life, cultural hybridity creates tension between traditional expectations and a modern desire for independence. To protect herself, she becomes emotionally distant, which becomes her way of maintaining autonomy. Although this choice gives her a sense of freedom and insight into the unfair expectations placed on women, it also leads to loneliness and isolation.

Contrarily, Preeti Shenoy's *The Rule Breakers* presents a more outward and active form of resistance. The protagonist challenges social norms through education by advocating for more inclusive ideas about relationships and identity. Her cultural hybridity functions in a more positive way, merging traditional family values with the opportunities afforded by modern education. Rather than withdrawing, she leverages these opportunities for personal growth and to effect change within her family and community. The novel thus offers a hopeful vision of women's empowerment, showing how gradual action and support within relationships can help challenge deep-rooted gender biases.

These differences show the wide range of ways women respond to cultural hybridity in contemporary Indian fiction. Although the protagonists take different paths, both novels share an important element: they use literature, personal stories, and family relationships as spaces where women can redefine themselves. In doing so, both texts question the traditional patriarchal narratives that often limit women to roles such as wife or mother. Meanwhile, it is important to note that the stories mainly focus on middle-class experiences. Even with this limitation, the novels however contribute importantly by expanding how Indian women are represented in literature. In fact, recent scholarship in 2025 has emphasised the need for exactly this kind of diversity and complexity in portraying femininity.

When the works of Shinie Antony and Preeti Shenoy are viewed together, they show that Indian womanhood is not fixed but shaped constantly through cultural negotiation. Roo's life, marked by painful yet quietly rebellious solitude, contrasts strongly with Veda's journey toward personal growth and social change. Through these two characters, the novels reject the notion that there is only

one way to be a woman. Instead, they reveal that living within hybrid cultural spaces can lead to either inner struggle or collective progress in contemporary India.

Future research could examine how digital platforms contribute to share and discuss such stories, allowing them to reach broader audiences and exert greater influence. It would also be valuable to extend similar studies to working-class and rural contexts, where women's experiences may differ considerably. As Elaine Showalter writes in *A Literature of Their Own* "Women must write themselves into history and literature. [p.g:261]." Thus, these novels highlight the power of literature to rethink and reshape ideas about gender, helping create a more inclusive literary space where cultural tensions can foster reflection, conversation and transformation.

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