

# Dominance And Defiance In The Master-Servant Relationship In Preeti Shenoy's *A Place Called Home*

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## Dominance And Defiance In The Master-Servant Relationship In Preeti Shenoy's *A Place Called Home*

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### ABSTRACT

*The master-servant relationship, historically pervasive across various societies, has often been characterised by significant disparities in power, privilege, and access to resources. The way different classes of people manage their daily lives, whether as employees or employers of domestic workers, is reflected in the domestic labour market. Aristocratic and wealthy families have historically hired domestic workers to handle household chores. This dynamic is firmly anchored in social structures, where some people or groups have power and control over others, frequently due to factors like wealth, social standing, or ethnicity. Men, women, or children have worked as domestic helpers, but historically, women have been chosen for this role more than men. Women are perceived as possessing "natural" nurturing abilities and attributes due to the pervasive patriarchal beliefs, practices, and institutions. The master-servant relationship often reinforces existing social hierarchies, with masters holding higher social status and power than their servants. This power dynamic can lead to exploitation, abuse, and the reinforcement of social norms that justify the unequal distribution of power and resources. In the novel *A Place Called Home*, Seema worked as a maid at the home of Mrs. Shetty in Delhi and her daughter Alka, assisted her mother in the household chores. Alka's success becomes a fulfillment of her mother's long-held hope of financial independence, a dream rooted in a life of servitude that Seema wishes her daughter to transcend. She married a wealthy coffee grower who owned 400 acres of land in Sakleshpur and had kept her past of being a maid's daughter a secret. However, when her past is exposed by Mrs. Shetty, it threatens to destroy her contented married life. But she fights it all bravely by visiting Mrs. Shetty's home in Delhi and brought out the humiliation endured by her mother and herself and warned Mrs. Shetty never again to interfere in her life again. The present article deals with the societal disparity in the master-servant relationship in the novel, *In a Place called Home*. Alka's journey reveals the courage required to confront societal prejudice and underscores the possibility of asserting one's identity despite systemic barriers. *A Place Called Home* thus becomes a poignant commentary on the deep-rooted issues of class disparity and the personal cost of social mobility.*

**Keywords:** Relationship, Conflict, Dominance, Defiance, Preeti Shenoy

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

One of India's top five best-selling contemporary Indian writers is Preeti Shenoy who is a well-known author, blogger, motivational speaker and a self-taught artist. She is known for her fictional writings and has profoundly influenced the world of literature, with her engaging stories and resonant characters. She has penned novels featuring protagonists who overcome the setbacks and start life anew. She has received numerous accolades for her literary works and her works have been translated into several regional languages. Her impact goes beyond the literary realm, as she is listed among the most significant Indian celebrities on Forbes' longlist. Shenoy has represented India at several international literary festivals, held in Birmingham, Sharjah, and Abu Dhabi. Prominent media organisations such as the Times of India, BBC World, Cosmopolitan, The Hindu, Verve, and others have recognised and praised her outstanding literary achievements. The Most Popular Self-Help Book of 2021 from Amazon India and the Popular Choice Fiction Award 2021 from the Times of India's AuTHER Awards are just two of the many honours Preeti has received for her writing. The 2017 "Indian of the Year" award and

the New Delhi Institute of Management's Business Excellence Award have also been given to her. Preeti Shenoy is known for her works that are simple to read and straightforward, yet they address important themes such as relationships, mental health, gender inequity, socioeconomic class differences, and difficulties faced by young adults. Human relationship is one of the prominent themes in her novels. Her ability to sensitively and deeply depict relationships and emotions has earned her a devoted readership. Her stories frequently highlight the victories, setbacks, and dilemmas that her characters' encounter while delving into the complexities of daily life. Through her books, she aims to inspire and uplift readers, encouraging them to reflect on their own lives and find meaning in their experiences. Preeti Shenoy began her writing journey with her debut novel, *34 Bubblegums and Candies* (2008). As a result of its huge popularity, Shenoy came to be known as a potential writer in the literary community. Since then, Preeti Shenoy has written several best-selling novels, including *Life is What You Make It* (2011), *Tea for Two and a Piece of Cake* (2012), *The Secret Wish List* (2012), *It Happens for a Reason* (2014), *It's All in the Planets* (2016), *A Hundred Little Flames* (2017), *Love A Little Stronger* (2018), *Wake Up, Life is Calling* (2019), *A Place Called Home* (2022), *The Rule Breakers* (2018), *The Magic Mindset: How to find your happy place* (2021), *When Love Came Calling* (2020).

## 2. OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of this paper are listed below:

- (1) To analyse the master-servant relationship in the novel.
- (2) To examine the power dynamics and authority in master-servant relationships.
- (3) To discuss ethical and moral implications.

## 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE/ RELATED WORKS:

Through Preeti Shenoy's literary perspective, Kumar, M. H. A. (2023) seeks to understand the maid's psychological struggles, pull and push factors, and coping mechanisms. Findings from the study indicated that poverty, the necessity for maids to help their immediate family members by working to prevent forced or early marriage, a lack of job opportunities in rural areas, and peer pressure remain the primary social and psychological forces. The expectations of urban lifestyles, alternative work options, and access to higher education, on the other hand, were the primary pull factors in Alka's life. [1]

Kumari, B. (2022) investigates the traits of womanhood in modern society by utilising Preeti Shenoy's writings. Preeti Shenoy's novels have given women a new definition of strength, bravery, independence, equality, power, and achievement. Because women are the main architects of the future civilisation, Shenoy stresses above all else the idea that they are the key to the future. [2]

According to Singh, G. N. & Kumari, B. (2023), most women ought to take a stand and form their own opinions, even if they deviate from accepted wisdom. Preeti Shenoy accurately captures contemporary society in all of its nuances in her works, reflecting it while simultaneously providing answers. Her characters are dynamic depictions of people acting and reacting to the challenges they encounter in their personal and family lives; they are not fictional. [3]

Kumar, A. (2022) emphasises how Shenoy's modern storytelling and Woolf's inventive narrative techniques both add to the postmodern literary tradition by giving readers a profound comprehension of reality, identity, and the complexity of human life. By looking at these components, this essay highlights postmodernism's enduring value in literature as well as its capacity to respond to the changing issues of various cultures and eras. [4]

Kodali (2016) asserts that a new woman is perceived in today's society as someone who does not fit into conventional circles, is self-reliant, capable of making choices, capable of leading others, willing to mentor others, and, most importantly, meticulously plans her life. It is critically necessary to redefine the "new woman" as a strong, intelligent, spiritual, and physically fit person who lives life to the fullest and balances her personal and professional lives, rather than embracing a modernist appearance and lifestyle. [5].

Antony, A. A. (2024) highlights Shenoy's contribution to modern Indian literature and her capacity to capture the spirit of modern Indian life. Examining Shenoy's work's thematic and narrative elements highlights the significance of her literary contributions and her impact on readers' understandings of social and personal issues. [6]

Dagar, M. & Raghav, P. (2019) in their article focus on the well-known cosmopolitan female writer Preeti Shenoy, who portrays women as modern people who are battling all the expectations of the technology-driven economies of today's globalised society. [7]

Mahajan, K. N. (2024) aims to provide a deeper understanding of how Shenoy's characters deftly navigate social barriers to develop into strong, self-reliant individuals who defy expectations. By providing fresh viewpoints on complex representations in modern literature, this study adds to the larger discussion surrounding the experiences of the "New Woman". [8]

Thiyagarajan, K. A. (2023) analyses July's relationship with the Smales, the White. July's People has become a potent novel for social, racial, and cultural transformation. This paper illustrates the total change of attitude between the master-servant relationships and the transformation in social, racial, and cultural relationships. [9]

#### 4. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

This study employs an exploratory approach, analysing content from the primary source, a novel by Preeti Shenoy titled *A Place Called Home*, as well as peer-reviewed articles, scholarly papers, and relevant online sources. The researcher utilized Google Scholar to conduct a comprehensive literature review of the topic.

#### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

##### Follow orders:

While working as a maid at Mrs. Shetty's place, neither Seema nor her daughter received much care from Mrs. Shetty, who only wanted them to obey her orders.

One night, Alka was feeling very cold and hugged her mother tightly as they lay on the thin mattress, covered in the fleece blanket they shared. Unable to bear the cold, Alka asked her mother if they could ask Mrs. Shetty for a room heater for them. But her mother was against that idea and told her daughter not to ask for things and be content with what they had. Alka was eyeing the room heater that was lying unused in the guest bedroom. But Seema was very grateful to Mrs. Shetty for looking after them well and taking them into her home when they had nowhere to go. One evening, without her mother's knowledge, Alka approached Mrs. Shetty and requested for the room heater that no one was using. Overhearing her daughter's request, Seema wanted Alka to apologise to Mrs. Shetty for asking the heater. Alka was adamant and didn't want to apologise as she felt that she had not committed any mistake. Mrs. Shetty told Alka that she was sending her to the same school as Tanvi and it was one of the finest schools in Delhi. Also, the school fees that she was paying for her was more than what her mother would earn if she worked for her for two whole years. She also told her sharply that

If I thought your room needed a heater, you wouldn't have to ask me for one. I'd have given it to you myself. There should be a limit to your greed. Don't ever ask me for anything again. I am taking care of you well, am I not? (Shenoy, 2022, p. 17) [10]

Being a little girl of ten, Alka didn't understand the comparison that Mrs. Shetty gave between the room heater and her school fees. Alka could only differentiate between right and wrong and she knew that she hadn't done anything wrong. Even though Alka did not get the room heater she was happy that she had not apologised to Mrs. Shetty.

But things changed after a few years. Even though Alka's mother no longer worked as a maid at Mrs. Shetty place, Mrs. Shetty, tried to ruin Alka's contented married life by exposing her secret past to her husband Subbu. This caused tensions in Alka's marital life. Hatred for her, and frustration over her unfair behaviour, came flooding back to Alka. Alka dressed up well and landed in Delhi at Mrs. Shetty's place and confronted Mrs. Shetty. She had realized long ago that people respected a person when one was well dressed. Alka entered her name as Mrs. Shekhar from the Inner Circle Club in the register. Assuming Alka to be a member of her precious club, Mrs. Shetty welcomed her into the house. But when Alka disclosed her identity, Mrs. Shetty got wild and immediately ordered her to leave her home. However, Alka didn't give a chance for Mrs. Shetty nor Tanvi to utter a word and boldly vented out her hidden feelings against them.

I want to tell you that neither my mother nor me deserved the treatment you gave us. You thought you had done my mother the biggest favour in the world, sending me to the same school as your

daughter. But she gave you more in return, didn't she? She did everything for you, including cleaning up your vomit when you were ill. Ask yourself whether you treated her, how you treated us, was fair. Did you think we didn't receive kindness just because we didn't have money? What exactly was your thought process? Did you believe that we were somehow lesser than you? (Shenoy, 2022, p. 221) [10]

Tanvi was not spared by Alka either as Tanvi believed that because Alka's mother was employed by Mrs. Shetty, she was superior to Alka. The incident at the party where Tanvi and her friends made fun of her for being invited, and the fact that Alka had "dared to come for it," were things that Alka could never forget. Alka was enlightened by this incident and became aware of Tanvi's true nature. She had learnt whom to avoid and had discovered a significant life lesson. Alka warned Mrs. Shetty that since she and her mother had settled their debt to them, she should never again meddle in her affairs. Alka changed the situation by forcing her former master to listen to her instead of the other way around.

#### **Maintain boundaries:**

Alka was only permitted to enter Mrs. Shetty's house to do housework; she was not permitted to play there. Alka had become accustomed to Mrs. Shetty's rules and had never left the room except to perform her daily tasks. When she was tempted to eat the chocolates that Mrs. Shetty had saved for Tanvi in her kitchen, she recalled that her mother had reprimanded her and then hurried out to replace the chocolates. Because the chocolates were pricey and depleted their savings, she advised Alka not to do it again. Despite the fact that Alka had only been a young child, Mrs. Shetty had shown her insensitivity and treated her in an inhumane manner.

Seema and Alka were never permitted to sit at the dining table or on the couches in Mrs. Shetty's home and only imported milk and similar items were kept in the refrigerator by Mrs. Shetty, and were exclusively for them. Since there were no chairs in their tiny room, Alka had always seen her mother either standing in the kitchen or sitting on the floor.

#### **Recognition and Appreciation:**

Whenever Mrs. Shetty's friends from her Inner Circle Club visited her, she'd show Alka off as her charity project. While Alka served the guests snacks and tea, Mrs. Shetty would converse with her in English. When Alka replied flawlessly, the women were shocked how well she spoke and appreciated Mrs. Shetty for the great job she was doing. Alka felt like a circus monkey who had to perform and win over its master while Mrs. Shetty revelled in the compliments. Alka detested everything because she thought Mrs. Shetty was attempting to brag to her friends about her maid's daughter's fluency in English.

'I hate it, Aayi. She treats me like I am some pet she has taught tricks to. I hate answering all her friends' questions. She is trying to show off to them that I know English, don't you see that? (Shenoy, 2022, p. 28) [10]

But Tanvi was never asked to speak in front of those women by Mrs. Shetty. All of this was incomprehensible to Alka's mother, who assured her that she had nothing to be ashamed of. For many years, this practice of performing in front of various audiences persisted.

#### **Growth and development:**

Alka received free education from Mrs. Shetty and was enrolled in the same esteemed Delhi school as Tanvi. Alka was a bright young woman who put a lot of effort into her studies, and Mrs. Shetty talked about her exam results at club meetings. Since Alka showed such promise and was deemed a "worthy case," the club members made the decision to establish a trust fund in order to raise money for her education. Mrs. Shetty felt empty as she adapted to life without her daughter after Tanvi relocated to the US to pursue her education after high school. Even though Alka didn't need any encouragement, Mrs. Shetty seemed to give her full attention and pushed her to work hard in her studies. She had consistently excelled academically. Mrs. Shetty was more than happy to showcase Alka's development during her club meetings. In the CBSE Class 12 board exams, she was one of the 2% of applicants who passed. Alka's persistence and steadfast dedication to her studies were rewarded. But Alka had to finish all of Mrs. Shetty's chores, even though her classmates were going out to celebrate their successes. Alka was fortunate enough to be accepted into a prestigious women's university in Delhi, where she started her bachelor's degree program in sociology. With a scholarship, Alka only had to pay half of the tuition fee that inspired the Inner Circle Club members to raise funds to help more deserving children like Alka.

Due to her background, Alka avoided socialising with the others and kept to herself but no one dared to mock at her because of her outstanding academic skills. During a career counselling session in their third year of college, students were asked about their future plans. Alka was ready to begin looking for work after graduation because she believed she could begin earning money right away. She looked forward to the day when she could leave the prison where she had been raised and live on her own. At Alka's college, Ms. Senapathy, a science lecturer whose daughter-in-law was a member of the Inner Circle Club, was aware of Alka's past. She convinced the head of the sociology department to encourage Alka to apply to the Management Institute in Bangalore. Alka passed the management entrance exam and was disturbed when she was selected, even though she didn't think she had a chance. Even though she was aware of the benefits of obtaining a quality management education and was able to easily pay for living expenses and fees because the club had set up a trust fund for her she was reluctant to stay far from her mother. If studying in Bangalore would help Alka land a respectable job, Seema suggested it. After graduating with high grades, Mrs. Shetty urged Alka to pursue further education and Alka passed out with flying colours.

#### **Excess Work:**

Seema was permitted to take one Sunday off per month, and even then, she had to return to work by 6.30 p.m. after finishing the kitchen clean up and dishwashing. Seema never voiced any complaints, but Alka felt that this was unfair. Alka had to work as soon as she came back from school and it was Alka's responsibility to clear everything after school.

Alka, Tanvi's bed is not made and you haven't picked up her uniform from the floor either! How many times do I have to remind you? You need to get to these things as soon as you come back from school, understand? Not later.' (Shenoy, 2022, p. 13) [10]

With a dusting cloth and cleaning solution Alka had to clean Tanvi's desk while Tanvi lay on her bed listening to music. Even though Alka was asked to clean the desk by Mrs. Shetty, Tanvi would get agitated and didn't want anyone to touch her belongings. But Alka was well aware about the consequences she had to face from Mrs. Shetty if she discovered dust collected on her desk. Alka was constantly treated rudely by Mrs. Shetty. After completing all of her assigned tasks, little Alka had to apply more pressure to Mrs. Shetty's legs, which were lumps of lard. Mrs. Shetty used to place her feet on the stool and sit on the cushioned chair and Alka pressed Mrs. Shetty's legs until she was told to stop. Meanwhile, Seema had to get some ginger tea in between for Mrs. Shetty. Even though Alka had a lot of homework to complete and wanted to play in the park, Mrs. Shetty didn't care about her and asked Alka stop massaging at dusk thereby ruining her play time.

#### **Poor Living Conditions:**

Seema had worked faithfully for twenty-two years at Mrs. Shetty place by cleaning her toilets, taking care of her home, cleaning up her vomit when she was unwell and changing her daughter's diapers when she was a baby. She had done everything for them. The same windowless room had been their home for many years and they stayed in the dark, ill ventilated 10 x 8 feet room that was attached to Mrs. Shetty's sprawling house. Alka shared a bathroom with her mother and her teeth chattered as she made use of the ice cold water turning her hands red. The bathroom that was attached to their tiny room did not have hot water facility. They were not allowed to use other bathrooms in the house. Every morning before Alka left for school, her mother used to heat water for her on the stove for her bath but she couldn't ask her mother to heat water just to wash her hands.

When it came to healthcare, there was a world of difference between what the privileged and the underprivileged got. Excess work and the poor living conditions, was taking a toll on Seema. When Seema had fallen ill twice, she'd just taken some over-the-counter medication that Mrs. Shetty had got. Seema was steadily losing weight and the physician had advised her to rest for at least fifteen days as she had some sort of a respiratory infection— probably pneumonia. But she had insisted on steroid injections from the local doctor as she couldn't take leave from work and lost her life.

## 6. CONCLUSION:

The current article on master-servant relationship highlights how power, class, and individual ambitions influence people's lives for generations. Seema's ambition to give her daughter Alka, a better future highlights the perseverance and sacrifices made by people in lower positions, as well as the transformational potential of education and willpower. As she becomes financially independent and rises in society, Alka's journey represents the end of the cycle of servitude. Even when advancement is attained, her emotional battle with the legacy of her family's past serves as an example of how deeply rooted injustices and power disparities can cause lifelong wounds. Alka's encounter with Mrs. Shetty represents her desire to confront the humiliation she and her mother experienced and regain their dignity. Her outburst is a cathartic release of the hurt and resentment that have built up over the years, in addition to being an act of rebellion against the oppressive system. As Alka regains her voice and demands respect, claiming control over her life's narrative and defying the social hierarchies that once restricted her, the story ultimately supports the notion that true empowerment entails both material success and emotional liberation. The intricacies of master-servant relationships and the enduring effects of societal structures on individual identity and self-worth are thus powerfully commented upon in this novel.

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