

## Reading Preeti Shenoy's *Life is What You Make It* as an Epistolary Novel

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### Abstract

Letters are the oldest means of communication and as such, the technique is used in literature also. Letters carry an emotional significance and are important social convention. When we study the narrative technique in literature, it is called Epistolary Technique. Epistolary novels have the narrative technique wherein the writers use the medium of letters, diary entries, and other written documents, as a means of conveying the innermost feelings of the characters. Preeti Shenoy is an Indian writer who writes in English. Shenoy has used this epistolary technique in one of her novels, *Life is What You Make It*, to provide an intimate and personal glimpse into Ankita Sharma's thoughts, feelings, and struggles as she navigates her way through a challenging period in her life. This paper will analyse letters, diaries, etc. as a means of narration and also see how Shenoy has incorporate this technique to provide insight to her main character Ankita Sharma's life.

### Letter as a Way of Communication

The inclusion of letters in literature can be seen as a reflection of the historical importance of letter-writing as a means of communication in the past. Before the advent of modern technology, letter-writing was one of the primary means of long-distance communication, and it was an essential part of maintaining social and familial connections.

As a result, letters often carried great emotional weight and significance, and they were often cherished and preserved as keepsakes. In literature, the inclusion of letters can be used to evoke a sense of nostalgia for a bygone era, as well as to convey the emotional intensity and intimacy of the relationships between the characters.

For example, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the letters between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy play a significant role in the development of their relationship. Through their

correspondence, the characters are able to express their true feelings and intentions to each other, overcoming the misunderstandings and miscommunications that had previously kept them apart.

Similarly, in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, the letters between Jane and her friend Helen Burns serve to illuminate the inner emotional life of the protagonist, as well as to reveal her growing sense of independence and self-reliance.

In some cases, letters can also be used as a narrative device to reveal important plot points or to provide exposition. For example, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the letters written by Robert Walton to his sister serve to introduce the reader to the story's main character, Victor Frankenstein, and to foreshadow the tragic events that will unfold.

By including letters in their works, authors are able to create a sense of intimacy and emotional intensity that can be difficult to achieve through other means of narration.

### **Epistolary Novels**

The word "epistolary" comes from the Greek word "epistolē," which means "letter." Epistolary novels are a type of novel that is written in the form of letters, journal entries, and other documents. Rather than being told through a third-person omniscient narrator, these novels are composed entirely of documents that the characters have written or received. The result is a distinctive form of storytelling that allows for an intimate, immersive reading experience. This style of novel became popular in the 18th century and continued to be used in various forms throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

The epistolary novel is characterized by the use of letters, diary entries, and other written documents as the primary means of telling the story. The narrative unfolds through a series of correspondence between characters, often with each letter or entry revealing more about the plot, characters, and themes. This style of novel allows for multiple perspectives, as different characters express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences in their own words. The reader is often left to piece together the story through the various letters and documents, creating a sense of intimacy and immediacy that can be very powerful.

The origins of the epistolary form can be traced back to ancient literature, with examples such as Ovid's *Heroides* and the letters between Saint Paul and various early Christian communities. However, it wasn't until the 18th century that the epistolary novel became a popular literary genre. One of the earliest examples of the epistolary novel is *Pamela*, a novel by Samuel Richardson published in 1740. The novel is written in the form of letters between the main character, Pamela Andrews, and her parents, as well as letters from other characters. The story follows Pamela as she works as a servant in the home of a wealthy landowner, Mr. B, who tries to seduce her. Through her letters to her parents and other characters, Pamela recounts her experiences and emotions, and the reader gets a glimpse into her inner life and struggles. In *Clarissa*, the titular character writes letters to various family members and friends as she struggles against the advances of a lecherous suitor.

Epistolary novels continued to be popular throughout the 19th century, with works such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which is told through a collection of diary entries, letters, and newspaper clippings. Other famous examples of epistolary novels from this time period include Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, which is told through a series of dramatic monologues.

While the popularity of epistolary novels waned in the 20th century, there are still notable examples of the genre in modern literature. For example, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is written in the form of letters between the protagonist, Celie, and her sister, Nettie. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver, the story is told through a series of letters written by the protagonist, Eva, to her estranged husband.

One of the key features of the epistolary novel is the way in which it blurs the lines between fiction and reality. Epistolary novels often have a unique narrative structure, as the story is not told in a linear fashion. By presenting the narrative through a series of letters, readers are invited to inhabit the same world as the characters and to see events unfold through their eyes. This can create a sense of immediacy and emotional intensity that is hard to achieve with other forms of narration. At the same time, the fact that the letters are written by fictional characters can make the story feel more authentic and believable, as if the events were really happening.

Another important aspect of the epistolary form is the way in which it allows for multiple perspectives on the same events. Because different characters are writing the letters, readers are

privity to a variety of viewpoints, which can sometimes be contradictory. This can create tension and suspense as the reader tries to piece together the truth from the various accounts. It can also be a powerful tool for character development, as the letters reveal not just what characters do, but also how they think and feel about their actions and the events around them.

### **Preeti Shenoy**

Preeti Shenoy is an Indian author and artist who has written several popular novels, as well as numerous articles and columns for various publications. She was born in 1971 in Bengaluru, India, and grew up in a family of doctors.

Shenoy initially pursued a career in medicine, earning a degree in dental surgery. However, she eventually decided to follow her passion for writing, and began submitting articles and stories to various publications. Her first book, *34 Bubblegums and Candies*, a collection of short, light-hearted stories, was published in 2008.

Since then, Shenoy has published several more novels, including *Life is What You Make It*, *The One You Cannot Have*, *It Happens for a Reason*, and *Wake Up, Life is Calling*. Her novels explore themes of love, relationships, family, and personal growth, and are known for their relatable characters and emotional depth.

In addition to her writing, Shenoy is also an accomplished artist, and her artwork has been featured in several exhibitions. She has also given numerous talks and workshops on writing and creativity, and is known for her motivational and inspirational messages.

Shenoy's work has been well-received by readers and critics alike, and she has won several awards for her writing. Her books have been translated into several languages and have been bestsellers in India and abroad. Shenoy has also been named one of the most influential women in India by several publications.

In addition to her literary work, Shenoy is also an active philanthropist and has worked with several charities and organizations to promote education, literacy, and women's empowerment. She

is a strong advocate for mental health awareness and has spoken openly about her own struggles with depression.

Preeti Shenoy is a talented and versatile writer and artist who has made significant contributions to the Indian literary landscape. Her work explores the complexities of human relationships and personal growth, and her message of positivity and resilience has inspired readers around the world.

### ***Life is What You Make It***

*Life is What You Make It* is a novel by Indian author Preeti Shenoy, first published in 2011. The story follows the journey of a young woman named Ankita Sharma, who faces several challenges and obstacles in her life as she struggles to find her purpose and meaning.

The novel is divided into three parts, each representing a different phase in Ankita's life. The first part is set during her college years, where Ankita is a bright and ambitious student pursuing a degree in business. However, her life takes a sudden turn when she is diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a mental illness that severely affects her emotional and mental well-being. The novel explores Ankita's struggles with her illness, including her hospitalization, treatment, and the impact it has on her relationships with her family, friends, and loved ones.

The second part of the novel takes place several years later, after Ankita has moved to Mumbai and started a new life. Here, she faces new challenges and obstacles, including a difficult job and a tumultuous relationship. Despite these setbacks, Ankita remains determined to overcome her past and find happiness and fulfilment.

The final part of the novel sees Ankita returning to her hometown and facing her past once again. Here, she confronts her illness, her family, and the choices she has made in her life. The novel culminates in a powerful and emotional climax, as Ankita discovers the true meaning of her life and the power she has to shape her own destiny.

*Life is What You Make It* is a poignant and moving novel that explores themes of mental health, resilience, and the power of the human spirit to overcome adversity. Through Ankita's journey, the

novel offers a message of hope and inspiration to readers, reminding them that life is a journey filled with ups and downs, but ultimately, it is up to us to make the most of it.

### **Use of Epistolary Technique in *Life is What You Make It***

In *Life is What You Make It*, Preeti Shenoy has effectively used the epistolary technique to tell the story of Ankita Sharma, a young woman who is struggling to find her place in the world while also dealing with a mental illness.

The novel is divided into three parts, each of which is framed by a series of letters that Ankita has written to her former college professor, Dr. Madhusudan. These letters serve as a framing device for the story, as well as a means of giving the reader insight into Ankita's inner thoughts and feelings.

The first set of letters are written during Ankita's college years, and they detail her struggles with bipolar disorder. Through these letters, the reader is given a first-hand account of Ankita's experiences with the illness, including her hospitalization, treatment, and the impact it has on her relationships with her family, friends, and loved ones. The letters also reveal Ankita's determination to overcome her illness and lead a fulfilling life.

The second set of letters are written several years later, after Ankita has moved to Mumbai and started a new life. Here, she faces new challenges and obstacles, including a difficult job and a tumultuous relationship. Through these letters, the reader is given a glimpse into Ankita's struggles to find her place in the world and make sense of her past.

The final set of letters are written after Ankita returns to her hometown and faces her past once again. Here, she confronts her illness, her family, and the choices she has made in her life. The letters reveal the growth and change that Ankita has undergone throughout the course of the novel, as well as her newfound sense of purpose and self-acceptance.

Shenoy's use of the epistolary technique in *Life is What You Make It* is particularly effective in allowing the reader to connect with Ankita on a personal level. By using Ankita's letters to Dr. Madhusudan as a framing device, Shenoy is able to give the reader a more intimate and nuanced understanding of Ankita's experiences, as well as her hopes, fears, and dreams. The letters also

allow the reader to see the progression of Ankita's mental illness and her eventual recovery in a more tangible and impactful way.

Overall, the epistolary technique in *Life is What You Make It* is a powerful and effective means of telling Ankita's story. By using letters as a framing device, Shenoy is able to create a more personal and intimate connection between the reader and the protagonist, while also allowing for a more nuanced and complex exploration of the novel's themes.

The letters also allow Shenoy to explore Ankita's mental illness in a nuanced and impactful way. By writing about her experiences in real-time, Ankita is able to convey the emotional and psychological toll of bipolar disorder in a way that is both powerful and relatable. For example, in one letter, Ankita writes about her fear of relapse.

Through these letters, the reader is able to see Ankita's growth and transformation over the course of the novel. At the beginning, she is a young woman struggling to come to terms with her diagnosis and the impact it has on her life. But as the novel progresses, she becomes more determined to overcome her illness and take control of her future. By the end of the novel, Ankita has developed a sense of purpose and self-acceptance that is both inspiring and empowering.

The epistolary technique also allows for a more nuanced exploration of the novel's themes, particularly around mental health and resilience. Through Ankita's letters, Shenoy is able to explore the impact of bipolar disorder on her relationships, her work, and her sense of self. She also explores the ways in which Ankita is able to cope with her illness, including therapy, medication, and the support of her loved ones.

In addition, the use of letters as a framing device creates a sense of intimacy and connection between Ankita and the reader. Through her letters, Ankita becomes a relatable and sympathetic protagonist, someone who is struggling to find her place in the world while also dealing with a serious mental illness. This intimacy makes her journey all the more compelling and powerful, as the reader is able to see her growth and transformation up close.

### **Character Analysis of Ankita through Epistolary Technique**

Ankita's character in *Life is What You Make It* is explored in depth through the use of the epistolary technique. The letters that Ankita writes to Dr. Madhusudan reveal her innermost thoughts, feelings, and struggles, giving the reader a more personal and intimate understanding of her journey.

Through her letters, Ankita is portrayed as a young woman who is struggling to come to terms with her bipolar disorder diagnosis and the impact it has on her life. She writes candidly about her experiences, including the manic episodes that leave her feeling invincible and the depressive episodes that leave her feeling helpless and alone. She also writes about the stigma and shame she feels around her diagnosis, as well as the challenges of balancing her medication and therapy with her work and personal life.

As the novel progresses, Ankita's character undergoes significant growth and transformation. Through her letters, the reader is able to see Ankita become more determined to overcome her illness and take control of her future. She becomes more self-aware, acknowledging her own limitations and working to develop coping strategies to manage her symptoms. She also becomes more open and accepting of herself, learning to embrace her diagnosis and the challenges it brings.

Throughout the novel, Ankita's character is portrayed with sensitivity and nuance. Through her letters, she is presented as a complex and multifaceted character, one who is dealing with a serious mental illness while also trying to navigate the challenges of young adulthood. Her struggles and triumphs are portrayed in a way that is both relatable and inspiring, creating a sense of empathy and connection between the reader and the protagonist.

There are several instances in *Life is What You Make It* where Ankita reveals her innermost self through her letters. Here are a few examples:

1. In her first letter to Dr. Madhusudan, Ankita writes about the fear and confusion she feels after being diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She shares her struggle to understand what this means for her life and her future.
2. In another letter, Ankita writes about a manic episode she experienced while on a work trip. She describes feeling "unstoppable" and "invincible," and how this led her to make impulsive and reckless decisions that she later regretted.



3. In a particularly vulnerable letter, Ankita opens up about her struggles with suicidal thoughts.
4. As Ankita begins to take control of her illness and work towards recovery, she writes about the progress she's making and the strategies she's using to manage her symptoms. In one letter, she describes how she's been practicing mindfulness and meditation, and how this has helped her stay grounded and present in the moment.

Overall, the use of the epistolary technique in *Life is What You Make It* is an effective means of exploring Ankita's character. Through her letters, she is able to reveal her innermost thoughts and feelings, as well as her growth and transformation over the course of the novel. This creates a sense of intimacy and connection between the reader and the protagonist, making her journey all the more compelling and impactful.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the epistolary novel, which uses letters or diary entries to tell a story, is a unique and compelling narrative technique. By using this technique, authors are able to create a more personal and intimate connection between the reader and the characters, as the reader is able to gain insight into their innermost thoughts and emotions. Through the act of letter writing, characters are able to reveal themselves in a way that would be impossible through traditional third-person narration.

Epistolary novels have been used throughout literary history, from classics such as *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Dracula* to contemporary works like *Life is What You Make It*. This technique allows for a wide range of stories to be told, from tales of love and romance to explorations of mental illness and personal growth.

Despite the rise of digital communication, the epistolary novel remains a popular and effective narrative technique. In fact, the emergence of email and social media has only expanded the possibilities for this technique, as characters can now communicate through a wider range of mediums. The epistolary novel and letter writing as a narrative technique continue to captivate readers and provide a unique and personal way to tell a story.

*Life is What You Make It* is a powerful novel that explores the themes of mental illness, self-discovery, and personal growth. The use of the epistolary technique allows the reader to gain a more personal and intimate understanding of the protagonist, Ankita, and her journey as she navigates the challenges of living with bipolar disorder. Through her letters to Dr. Madhusudan, Ankita reveals her innermost thoughts, feelings, and struggles, creating a sense of empathy and connection between the reader and the character. *Life is What You Make It* is a poignant and inspiring novel that sheds light on the importance of self-care, resilience, and hope in the face of adversity.

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