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Decoding Bipolar Disorder: A Deep Dive Into Mental Health In Preeti Shenoy's "*Life is What you Make it*"

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Abstract

Preeti Shenoy is an Indian author and blogger. She was awarded the Author Popular Choice Award 2020 for her book *When Love Came Calling*. The second book by Shenoy, *Life Is What You Make It*, was published on January 1 2011 and became a national bestseller, along with its sequel, *Wake Up, Life Is Calling*. The protagonist of the novel, Ankita, undergoes a psychological trauma being affected by bipolar disorder. She struggled in every phase of her life to become successful. The life of Ankita represents the psyche of every human mind that learns from trial and error. Since she had bipolar disorder, she had to undergo a lot more than the average human mind. Bipolar disorder is a mental illness associated with episodes of mood swings ranging from depressive lows to manic highs. It is a combination of genetics, environment and altered brain structure. This paper focuses on how the human mind acts or reacts to every situation and how psychological transformation takes place in the human mind.

Keywords: Trauma, Bipolar Disorder, Human Mind, Mood Swings, Transformation.

Introduction

The fictional work *Life is What You Make It* by Preeti Shenoy labels the rollercoaster life of Ankita Sharma. The story is told in first-person narration, which enables us to relate to the protagonist, Ankita. Ankita finds herself in the National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) prologue. It has an excellent background and college life that most people would be able to identify with. She was young and enthusiastic, and through her talents, she managed to get herself into an MBA course in CUSAT. Later, she was admitted to a mental hospital. How and why is what this novel tries to answer.

Our mind is our biggest enemy, Ankita. But it can also be our biggest friend. There's so much beauty in life. We only have to look. (Shenoy, 2019). Preeti Shenoy explored the mysterious psyche of her characters and spotlessly pictured them. The novel is divided into twenty-three chapters, and in the eighteenth chapter, we can find Ankita's narration of her past days. The first part was about Ankita's college days at Cochin. She could not find any symptoms of her trauma from the first chapter to the ninth chapter—oscillation in deciding prevailed in her love relationships, which was one of the primary symptoms of bipolar disorder. She met Abhishek and fell in love with Ankita but she never told him. That was because

she always emphasised her aim of cracking the entrance test at a leading management school in Bombay for her MBA. He wanted to study with her to keep in touch, but she tried to skip away because she did not regret leaving her friends behind. However, it hurt Abhishek a lot, and that heartfelt sorrow ended up in his death.

The second part consists of her MBA studies in Bombay, where she psychologically struggled because of the death of Abi and finally had a breakdown of emotions, which turned uncontrollable. She turned out to be a prisoner of her mind. The strong words of Abi's grandfather, "NEVER BELITTLE LOVE", made her sleepless. She heard the voice of her inner mind saying, you always hurt those who love you which again confused her to accept the love of Joseph. She never chose to share her psychological struggle with anyone, which made her make wrong decisions repeatedly. If she had discussed it with someone or consulted a psychiatrist, she would have found a solution before it became a mess. She lost all her confidence, became incapable of all her potential and became emotionally weak. She had anger issues, which violently turned towards her father.

The third part shows Ankita's life in NIMH and the daring steps and strong fortitude that led her back into life. She had a tough time meeting the Psychiatrist for the first time. There, she felt like she was sinking because she was helpless, lost and angry. When the doctors forced her to confess, she felt trapped, waylaid, infuriated and suddenly very tired, and she just wanted it to end. So, she decided to confront everything that happened in her life.

Bipolar disorder or bipolar affective disorder is a psychiatric diagnosis for a mood disorder. Individuals with bipolar disorder experience episodes of a frenzied state known as mania (or hypomania), typically alternating with episodes of depression. At the lower levels of mania, such as hypomania, individuals appear energetic and excitable and may be highly productive. Individuals begin to behave erratically and impulsively at a higher level, often making poor decisions due to unrealistic ideas about the future, and may have great difficulty with sleep. At the highest level, individuals can experience many distorted beliefs about the world, known as psychosis, which can occasionally lead to violent behaviours. Manic and depressive episodes typically last from a few days to several months and can be interspersed by periods of everyday mood. The symptoms of bipolar disorder are sleeplessness, feeling energetic despite less sleep, increased or faster speech, uncontrollable battling thoughts or rapidly changing ideas or topics when speaking, distractibility, increased activity and increased risky behaviour.

She discovered her talent in note-making using colour sketches while doing her MBA. She thought it would be helpful to supply copies of her notes to the entire class and staff members. She was over-excited and worked for it. She prepared it day and night and lost her sleep. Gradually, every night became sleepless, yet it is another symptom of bipolar disorder. She was overconfident about herself.

Her parents discovered the letters, which brought her sickness to their notice. Her weird behaviour made her parents consult a psychiatrist. Dr. Madhusudan came into Ankita's life as a tiny ray of hope. Slowly, she understood what made her psychologically weak and came out of NIMH with a light of hope. She discontinued her MBA and joined a creative writing course. She constantly battled against her disorder. She managed to live an everyday life, but then there was again a storm when Joseph re-entered. Vaibhav became a daily visitor to her house, which she was uncomfortable with. These events again took her to depression, which she managed to hide because her parents had an eagle's eye on her. If anything goes wrong, she will again be admitted to NIMH.

In the sequel *Wake up, Life is Calling*, she learnt many vital ways to lead her life through her life experience. Her days in NIMH gave her the courage to battle her trauma, but her life experience gave her total relief from the guilt. Ankita became obsessed with reading and visited the library every day. She came across a book, which is a suicide manual. She could not resist herself from

taking that book. It explains all possible ways of committing suicide. One day, she tried one of them, covering her face with a plastic cover and left untied. She also left the book on the table and slept. Her parents discovered her with the plastic cover, and the book laid next to her, which led to the door of a psychiatrist. She refused to take tablets and pretended to be expected.

At some point in time, she came to know that the suicide manual belonged to Mrs. Hayden's husband. Ankita had a chance to move closer to Mrs. Hayden. Mrs. Hayden told Ankita about how she killed her husband with a heavy heart and lost her son due to a hereditary disease. Ankita was moved and decided to share her story. Mrs. Hayden, unlike other psychiatrists, made her understand she is not responsible for the actions of others. Psychiatrists helped her to remove the guilt of Abi's suicide running over her head, but Mrs. Hayden said she was not in any case responsible for it. Mrs. Hayden also exercised her to overcome her negative thoughts, which worked out for her. In the creative writing course, Mrs. Hayden had assigned an essay on the topic "What was the mistake you made in your life? What would you do differently?". This was one horrifying topic for her to write about because she wanted to change everything in her life. She was word-struck when she thought about this assignment. The answer to this question is a sign of the psychological transformation she has undergone.

Summing Up

People with bipolar disorder find it rigid to deal with the problems of their lives. Some circumstances in life cannot be handled without the help of others or some philosophical intervention. We do not know the answer to all the questions. Ankita developed the courage to deal with problems with a brave heart. People can only help you with words, but we must try to put it into our actions. Over some time, her perspective on life changed. Every single person around her taught her some lesson. That is where she was transformed psychologically. Not only NIMH but also her own life experience had given her the courage to look beyond obstacles.

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