

GENDER DYNAMICS AND EMOTIONAL TURBULENCE IN PREETI SHENOY'S THE ONE YOU CANNOT HAVE

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Abstract

The One You Cannot Have by Preeti Shenoy is a powerful look at love, loss, and emotional negotiation in modern Indian cities. The novel intricately examines the intersection of personal desires and societal expectations, delving into themes of unrequited love, relational dislocation, and the negotiation of identity within social constraints. This paper examines the novel through three analytical perspectives, namely urban individualism and emotional dislocation, the gender dynamics of choice and marriage, and the reconstruction of masculinity through emotional vulnerability. This study employs theoretical frameworks from scholars including Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, and R.W. Connell to illustrate how Shenoy's narrative encapsulates the psychological, social, and cultural tensions present in contemporary urban Indian life. The analysis shows that the novel not only shows how people deal with their own emotions, but also questions the rules of society as a whole. This allows us a more nuanced view of how relationships work today and how men and women experience things differently.

Keywords: Urban individualism, emotional dislocation, gender politics, marriage, masculinity, emotional vulnerability, societal expectations, identity, unrequited love, female agency, urban modernity, psychological realism.

INTRODUCTION

In modern Indian literature, romance fiction occupies a distinct niche that connects mainstream readership with introspective societal commentary. Preeti Shenoy's, *The One You Cannot Have* (2013) is an excellent illustration of this junction since it tells a narrative that is both emotionally appealing and socially insightful. The story follows Aman, a man who is still dealing with the ramifications of a prior romantic involvement with Shruti, who has already moved on and married Rishabh. The main conflict in the story is Aman trying to balance his own wants and needs with what society expects of him. Secondary characters like Anjali and Shruti help to show different points of view on love, freedom, and the ethics of relationships.

Set in urban India, the story looks at the stresses of modern city living and how things like moving around, job goals, and social networks affect emotional bonds. The city is more than just a place; it is a social and cultural context that affects who you are, what you want, and what you think is right and wrong. In this context, Shenoy analyzes the negotiation of emotional labor, the limitations imposed by gender conventions, and the ethical intricacies of unrequited love.

This research study contextualizes *The One You Cannot Have* within the extensive discourse on urban relationships and gender dynamics, emphasizing three principal analytical angles. First, it examines metropolitan individuality and emotional dislocation, investigating where urban existence cultivates solitude, fractured connections, and the struggle of personal identity. Second, it looks at the gender politics of choice and marriage, looking at how women can and can't make their own decisions under today's relationship standards. Third, it examines the reconstruction of masculinity via emotional vulnerability, highlighting the transformation of male identity in relation to personal bereavement and cultural expectations.

The research seeks to offer a thorough comprehension of the novel's exploration of urban emotional landscapes and gendered experiences by amalgamating literary analysis with theoretical frameworks from Judith Butler (gender performativity), Simone de Beauvoir (existential feminism), and R.W. Connell (hegemonic masculinity). The approach emphasizes the interaction between personal needs and societal expectations, providing a sophisticated viewpoint on modern Indian urban existence and its impact on love, identity, and relationship ethics.

Emotions in Metropolitan Cities

The One You Cannot Have (2013) by Preeti Shenoy deftly analyzes the paradoxical appeal of India's urban expansion, where megacities like Delhi, Bangalore, and Mumbai offer social mobility, cultural fusion, and career advancement but come at the expense of extreme loneliness and emotional disintegration. Shenoy sheds light on this dichotomy through Aman's return from overseas: the city as both a ladder and a trap, affording professional opportunities while

deepening the rift caused by unfulfilled feelings for Shruti. The city's cacophony serves as a constant reminder of the inner emptiness, while Aman's return recalls a ghostly familiarity tinged with alienation. Aman's homecoming evokes a spectral familiarity laced with estrangement; the city's clamor a relentless reminder of inner voids. As he grapples with memory's vise, Shenoy evokes its tyrannical grip: "It is funny what memories can do to you. How they can grip you by the throat, choke you, strangle you. And just when you thought you had it all sorted, too." (*The One You Cannot Have*, 6). In the face of unwavering commutes, corporate grinds, and performative sociality, this urban anomie takes the shape of "emotional dislocation," a sociological ill in which dense populations cultivate surface-level relationships devoid of deep connections, making genuine relationships elusive.

Shenoy examines how living in a city distorts interpersonal relationships, with Aman's interactions with Shruti and Anjali serving as a metaphor for the diminished rhythms of love under social pressure and work demands. The city's pernicious deterioration of vulnerability, where emotional admissions run the risk of being exposed in a space full of critical eyes, is the reason why conversations stall, not malice. . Aman's visceral reaction to Shruti's photograph crystallizes this torment:

I do not know what I expected, but I certainly did not expect to feel like this. And what I did not expect is this sudden rush of emptiness and excruciating agony that hit on seeing her picture. I want to scream and shout. I want to yell at her. And yet I do not want to feel this way. I want to be free of her. I want to move on. I have to" (*The One You Cannot Have*, 62).

Shenoy intensifies this in urban India, echoing Judith Butler's theory of performative gender, which holds that identities form through iterative social enactments: Shruti's familial calibrations of desire, Aman's stoic restraint and deliberate amours—all require constant negotiation amid professional demands and social expectations. The city heightens this performativity, freeing self-expressions while trapping them in the contradiction of authenticity, where unfiltered emotion collides with well-constructed societal structures.

Aman experiences psychic drift as a result of mobility, highlighting the gap between affective attachment and physical relocation during his expatriate period. Urban topographies—offices humming with aspiration, cafés bustling with meaningless chatter—emerge as psychic co-conspirators, their uncaring sprawl shaping emotional contours. The environment's involvement in mnemonic hauntings is revealed through Shenoy's minute details of everyday grind, which culminate in Aman's prophetic dream:

And so I drift off into a peaceful sleep, presuming that I'm starting a new chapter of my life, not knowing that at times, the unfinished ones come back and haunt you, dance on your head and suck every darn thing out of you, till you are reduced to a jumbled mess of nothingness. (*The One You Cannot Have*, 67).

Thus, the novel condemns the city as a haunted place where unfulfilled desires linger, unanchored by location but heightened by its noise, and it demands an examination of the irrevocable effects of love.

Shenoy's narrative of cognitive strangling and urban alienation is reminiscent of English literature's account of contemporary loneliness, in which cities work as furnaces for broken minds, fusing potential with ontological emptiness. An important analogy is provided by Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), whose London is a lively but dizzying palimpsest that reflects Aman's Mumbai gloom—bustling streets that drive social advancement while shattering inner peace. Woolf captures temporal disjuncture in Clarissa Dalloway's perambulations, which are replete with echoes of past loves like Peter Walsh and Aman's choked memories: "She had the perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day." (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 8). Woolf's stream-of-consciousness analyzes the cost of performativity—Clarissa's party as a gendered spectacle similar to Aman's circumspect courtships—but where Woolf's Edwardian ennui resulted in elegiac ambiguity, Shenoy's postcolonial energy turned dislocation into a guide for renegotiating relationships. Her prose is more democratic than Woolf's impressionistic flourishes.

Esther Greenwood's New York voyage in Sylvia Plath's 1963 novel *The Bell Jar* continues this theme, with Manhattan's glitz masking a suffocating loneliness and her romantic disappointments giving rise to manic-depressive spirals that mirror Aman's suffering after banishment. Plath's enclosure of the same name—"The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I couldn't seem to get it off my head. I couldn't breathe." (*The Bell Jar*, 155) brings to mind Shenoy Limns's suffocating memories, as both protagonists are drawn in by metropolitan promises that ultimately lead to emotional suffocation. While Shenoy's redemptive humanism contrasts with Plath's confessional bleakness, steeped in mid-century feminism's rage, Esther's fig-tree paralysis of choices reflects Aman's performative hesitations; Aman's hauntings drive proactive yearning, adapting Plath's Western atomism to India's communal undercurrents of familial expectation, while Esther teeters on tentative convalescence.

Aman's transnational drift and Gogol Ganguli's bicoastal existence—Calcutta sojourns pitted against American suburbia—both traverse emotional cartographies shattered by the aftershocks of migration. Jhumpa Lahiri's, *The Namesake* (2003) provides a diaspora-infused analogy in the Indian English canon. Lahiri examines the performativity of identity in the context of cultural hybridity: "He has never been able to decide whether to use his name or his surname... In spite of his name, he is not an *American*, not in the eyes of his parents, nor in his own." (*The Namesake*, 76), similar to Aman's outsider perspective in Mumbai, where unresolved Shruti-ties linger like the parental legacies of Gogol. While Shenoy's offices and cafés inspire mnemonic resurgences, Lahiri's humble lyricism criticizes urban

rootlessness—New York's anonymity magnifying familial voids—but Lahiri's elegiac restraint, overshadowed by irrevocable losses, gives way to Shenoy's hopeful drive toward closure, her narrative serving as a bridge from Lahiri's quiet exilic grief to empowered reintegration.

Shenoy's sections reinforce *The One You Cannot Have* as a modern English letter reply through these prisms, combining Lahiri's migratory melancholies with Woolf and Plath's introspective urban dreads, all the while making room for tenacious Indian urbanity. Her writing challenges readers to face the city not as an emotional executioner but as a bulwark for genuine, unencumbered selves in a time of global change.

Gender Negotiations of Love, and Marriage in Urban India

Insightfully examining gender dynamics via the lenses of marital choice and emotional entanglement, Preeti Shenoy's novel, *The One You Cannot Have* highlights the ongoing conflict between individual choice and social expectations. Shruti's union with Rishabh, created in the wake of her unresolved connection with Aman, symbolizes this dialectic: a relationship that tempers individual yearnings against the inevitable stream of society approbation, where women must calibrate liberty among familial and communal gazes. Shenoy elegantly depicts this as a deliberate maneuver rather than surrender, with Shruti's agency showing up in her calculated acceptance of stability while holding onto memories of previous passions. With painful intensity, the story examines this transitional space: "But can a new life be built on the foundations of a past soaked in unforgettable memories?." (*The One You Cannot Have*, 44). Anjali's audacious approaches to Aman broaden the range of feminine self-assertion, moving from quiet reflection to aggressive relationship pursuit, highlighting various forms of sensual and emotional expression in the urban setting. The existentialist feminism of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), which holds that women might achieve independence by transcending immanent roles and achieving real transcendence, is in perfect harmony with this tapestry of possibilities. According to De Beauvoir, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (*The Second Sex*, 301), highlighting the construction of subjectivity through intentional actions inside repressive systems. Shruti and Anjali, who negotiate societal scripts that dictate women's relationship subservience, represent this ethos in Shenoy's work. Their marital and romantic choices represent existential undertakings. These women are able to balance societal viability with emotional authenticity through the dual emergence of marriage as a normative framework and a place of subversive negotiation. In this context, Shenoy intensifies the irresistible charm of love, making it an unstoppable force:

If you are deliriously happy when you think about someone, and a smile creeps up on you, even when you are in the worst of moods, if even a mere thought of that person has a power to send a jolt of energy through your weary body, then it is nothing but love. You can try to squish it, pretend it does not exist, ignore it, try to make it go away, but it never entirely does." (*The One You Cannot Have*, 231).

Shenoy, avoids romantic absolutism and presents choice as a complex arithmetic in which Shruti's marriage combines practical balance with individual development, renouncing victimization in favor of volitional poise. On the other hand, Anjali's urban liaison with Aman is a prime example of adaptive desire, in which women's reevaluation of intimacy is facilitated by urban flux, exposing agency as relational but contextually flexible.

The moral ambiguities of romantic autonomy are at the heart of Shenoy's story, as women's decisions have an impact that extends beyond the individual to include moral reciprocities and social harmony. These choices, which are infused with an Indian collectivist mindset, balance societal optics, familial consequences, and personal eros, creating a web of interconnections that necessitates compassionate foresight. This ethical landscape is encapsulated by love's ambivalence, which is both exalting and abyssal: "This love, it is a funny thing. It can elevate you to the highest peak and plunge you to a bottomless pit." (*The One You Cannot Have*, 235). Shenoy encourages readers to think of agency as dialogic balance rather than solitary victory by transforming her characters from detached actors into moral interlocutors through these delineations. Their exchanges are a microcosm of the complex dance between autonomy and obligation.

Shenoy's insightful analysis of gendered relational ethics and existential decision-making is in line with feminist explorations in English literature, as women negotiate the divide between duty, desire, and selfhood in patriarchal environments. A modernist precedent can be found in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), where Clarissa Dalloway's sacrifice of passionate autonomy for marital propriety echoes Shruti's calibrated union. Both women enact de Beauvoirian transcendence through selective conformity, with Clarissa's inner monologues serving as a preface to Shenoy's contemplative reflections: "She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone." (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 199). Woolf's stream-of-consciousness reveals love's dizzying duality, like Shenoy's "highest peak and bottomless pit." But while Clarissa's choices are stuck in elegiac stasis because of Septimus's sacrificial rupture, Shenoy moves toward positive hybridity. Shruti's marriage, like Clarissa's party, becomes a performance of agency, but with postcolonial hope that social structures can be places of subversion instead of just subjugation.

In Sylvia Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), this parallel is strengthened by Esther Greenwood's defiance of matrimonial norms. Her romantic disappointments serve as a sharp contrast to Shruti's practical marriage and Anjali's aspirations, both of which struggle with the stifling persistence of love in the face of gendered norms. The novel's moral conundrums are reflected in Plath's Esther, who is ensnared by social "baking bread" tropes de Beauvoir

condemns: "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story... I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose." (*The Bell Jar*, 77). In juxtaposition with Shenoy's redemptive arcs, where Esther's agency fights into institutionalization, Anjali's urban maneuvers affirm de Beauvoir's call to the overthrow of immanence, adapting Plath's mid-century alienation to India's relational tapestries of familial ethics. This paralyzing choice resonates with Shruti's memory-soaked deliberations, but Plath's confessional ferocity yields unrelieved entrapment.

These themes are emphasized in Indian English literature by Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), where Ammu's rebellious violation of "Love Laws," her wild passion a visceral critique of marital conformity that echoes Shruti's haunted foundations and Anjali's audacious desires, both women negotiating desire against caste and familial rules. Roy's spellbinding sigh—"They all broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much." (*The God of Small Things*, 159), —echoes Shenoy's moral interconnections, where the unstoppable nature of love resists repression, much like Ammu's "jolt of energy" does after her death. But Roy's tragic surrealism, rooted in historical violence, stands in stark contrast to Shenoy's modern humanism; Ammu's decisions lead to exile and erasure, while Shruti and Anjali negotiate toward ethical flourishing. Roy's critique of gendered norms is extended into blueprints for dialogic agency, where social webs, despite their tension, give way to women's deliberate weaves. Gauri's marital disillusionment and extramarital drift mirror the novel's ethical entanglements in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* (2013), which offers a diasporic coda. Her abandonment of scripted roles is a de Beauvoirian assertion amid Naxalite shadows and American exile, similar to Shruti's past-haunted stability: "She had made a separate peace with her life... It was not a life she had chosen, but it was the one she had." (*The Lowland*, 278). Lahiri's subtle sorrow over the moral costs of love is reminiscent of Shenoy's "unforgettable memories," but her characters' decisions result in irreversible fractures that give way to Shenoy's hopeful compromises; Gauri's lonesome transcendence contrasts with Anjali's communal endeavors, while Lahiri's exilic restraint is refracted through Shenoy's urban Indian sociability.

Shenoy's novel stands out as a crucial feminist contribution in these creative exchanges, combining the introspective rebellions of Woolf and Plath with the socio-cultural reckonings of Roy and Lahiri. They also ground de Beauvoir's philosophy in the visceral ethics of contemporary Indian women. Thus, her work reimagines relational choice as a bright negotiation of desire's veils, showing pathways where autonomy and reliance merge in resilient harmony rather than as gendered submission.

Reimagining Masculinity through Vulnerability and Urban Flux

The One You Cannot Have (2013) by Preeti Shenoy uses Aman's reflective journey as a lens through which to examine the transformation of masculinity in contemporary Indian urbanity, where stoic archetypes based on emotional stoicism, dominance, and invulnerability give way to more porous, sympathetic configurations. Aman's open acceptance of vulnerability goes against these hegemonic molds and fits with R.W. Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity, which says that there are different types of male expressions and that subordinated or marginalized masculinities can challenge the dominant model through relational authenticity and emotional honesty. Through Aman's intricate self-reckoning, where life's whims necessitate astute navigation, Shenoy demonstrates this evolution: The path we plan for ourselves meanders in ways we can never imagine. Life never ceases to throw us googlies. It is how we handle them that make all the difference. Sometimes you have to take control of it and, at other times, it is best to let go. And the wisest of persons is the one who knows which option to choose." (*The One You Cannot Have*, 235).

Far from being emasculating, Aman's unguarded love for Shruti, sympathetic relationship with Anjali, and management of inner storms reinterpret vulnerability as a fundamental aspect of mature manhood—one that combines social responsibility with emotional intelligence, sensitive to the demands of urban flux where self-reflection replaces suppression.

This re-articulation also extends to cultural inquiries of masculine fragility, wherein urban anonymity affords free venues for uncensored expression, but performative rigors are maintained by ingrained standards. Judith Butler's gender performativity—where identity unites through repeated enactments amid discursive pressures, making masculinity a flexible praxis rather than a fixed essence—is embodied in Aman's liminal life, which is situated between private authenticity and public scrutiny. Shenoy emphasizes this dialectic by using Aman's plunge into despair as a metaphor for rebirth: "I feel as though I'm at the bottom of a long cavernous well, looking up at the light coming from high above. I need to climb out towards the light. All I need is a rope." (*The One You Cannot Have*, 237). As a result, the novel presents metropolitan environments as testing grounds for male reinvention, where vulnerability manifests as an ethical compass rather than a sign of weakness, promoting compassionate equilibria amid complex interpersonal relationships.

The synergy of relational ethics and masculinity is at the center of the story, with Aman's balancing of duty, eros, and kindness creating a moral map for males caught in emotional dilemmas. Interlacing the paths of Aman, Shruti, and Anjali, Shenoy's tapestry reveals the demands of balancing individuality against collective tapestries, where gendered agency, urban isolation, and moral interdependence come together. This all-encompassing perspective affirms

vulnerability as a relational and moral lodestar, demystifying the challenges of modern Indian relationships while also enhancing worldwide discussions on the flexibility of masculinity.

English literature's depictions of male vulnerability as a subversive ethos, in which protagonists tear down hegemonic façades to create sympathetic selfhoods against societal headwinds, resonates powerfully with Shenoy's exploration of introspective masculinity amid metropolitan isolation. Aman's well-bound misery and performative tensions are mirrored in Virginia Woolf's, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), which provides a modernist prototype through the shell-shocked collapse of Septimus Warren Smith. Smith's unrestrained emotional rivers are a defiant response to post-war stoicism. Woolf views Septimus's psychological collapse as a gendered critique: "Men must not cut down trees. There is cruel justice in the forest... He had committed an act of violence against himself." (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 199), bringing to mind Connell's subjugated masculinities, in which pain reveals the vulnerability that lies behind power. But in contrast to Woolf's polyphonic elegy, which condemns Septimus to sacrificial erasure—his suicide a silent critique of institutional rigidity—Shenoy arcs toward redemptive ascent, with Aman's "rope" of relational bonds serving as a lifeline absent in Clarissa's vicarious survivals; Woolf's Bloomsbury introspection, which is laced with androgynous fluidity from *A Room of One's Own*, foreshadows Shenoy's Butlerian performativity.

Despite being focused on the female psyche, Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) subverts restrictive standards by subtly refracting masculine tropes through Buddy Willard's patriarchal assumptions. His emotional inarticulacy serves as a counterpoint to Aman's reflexive openness. Plath mocks Buddy's "strong" exterior—"He was a true, true prince. That's why I didn't marry him." (*The Bell Jar*, 58), as hollow artifice, paralleling Shenoy's critique of dominance as emotional exile. Esther's fig-tree paralysis mirrors Aman's winding paths, both navigating life's "googlies" within gendered narratives. However, Plath's confessional venom results in sardonic detachment, and Buddy's masculinity resists vulnerability's grace. In contrast, Aman's empathetic connections with Shruti and Anjali validate Connell's concept of plural masculinities. Shenoy consequently expands Plath's mid-century gender conflicts into modern Indian relational ethics, where male introspection fosters communal harmony instead of ironic isolation.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) intensifies these resonances through the fractured masculinities of Estha and Velutha, whose repressed desires—Estha's trauma-induced mutism and Velutha's caste-defying tenderness—challenge dominant "Love Laws" with fragile insurrection, reminiscent of Aman's Butlerian negotiations within urban conventions. Roy invokes Velutha's moral eros: "It was the brief extraordinary brilliance of the moon that night that made him see her so clearly... He touched her, the tiny pulse in her neck beating under his thumb." (*The God of Small Things*, 335), a tactile revolt that reflects Aman's unfulfilled Shruti-longings, both of which represent marginalized masculinities according to Connell. Roy's lyrical fatalism—Velutha's lynching, Estha's enduring silence—stands in stark contrast to Shenoy's redemptive ascents. While Roy's Kerala backwaters are filled with historical hauntings, Shenoy's metropolitan flux allows for performative reinvention. Her story is a hopeful ending to Roy's elegiac dissections of gendered subjugation.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) offers a diasporic counterpoint through Gogol Ganguli's hyphenated identity, his expatriate experiences and paternal estrangements serving as a narrative of vulnerability's subtle rebellion against the rigid demands of assimilation, paralleling Aman's expatriate return and ethical dilemmas. Lahiri captures the gap in Gogol's performance: "He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, or who he wants to be." (*The Namesake*, 76), Aman's deep-seated self-doubt is similar to how society sees him. Butler says that both main characters create their identities through relational breaks—Gogol's marital problems echo Aman's triangulated affections—but Lahiri's quiet sadness stays in exilic uncertainty, while Shenoy moves toward ethical flourishing. Lahiri's American-Indian limitation adds to Shenoy's urban Indian ethos, both of which show how masculinity has changed through empathetic, non-hegemonic lenses.

Shenoy's novel, crystallize *The One You Cannot Have* as a luminous intervention in English letters in these symphonic echoes, grounding Connell and Butler in the visceral flux of modern Indian manhood while harmonizing Woolf and Plath's modernist gender probes with Roy and Lahiri's postcolonial reckonings. Thus, vulnerability is heralded by her art as a relational apex rather than a manly nadir—a beacon for reweaving gendered fabrics in an era of introspective urbanity.

CONCLUSION

The One You Cannot Have by Preeti Shenoy is not just a romance caught in the neon haze of urban India; rather, it is a profound mapping of the human heart, showing the perilous spaces where societal structure and personal desire intersect. Shenoy reveals the city as a palimpsest of possibility and danger—a place where professional successes conceal emotional exiles and interpersonal relationships struggle under the weight of performative scripts—through Aman's haunted return home, Shruti's covert desires, and Anjali's bold attempts for connection. The novel's dialectical tension is illuminated by this tripartite investigation—which spans the maze-like displacements of urban loneliness, the veiled negotiations of gendered agency in love and marriage, and the fractured reinventions of masculine vulnerability—where Butler's iterative enactments, de Beauvoir's existential transcendence, and Connell's plural masculinities come together to dismantle monolithic identities.

By combining these perspectives, Shenoy's story extends Roy's tragic critiques of "Love Laws" and Lahiri's diasporic elegies into arenas of ethical renewal, where vulnerability—whether feminine or masculine—becomes a subversive syntax for relational harmony. It also transcends the confessional intimacy of Woolf's Clarissa and Plath's Esther, whose urban solitudes yield elegiac stasis, by infusing them with postcolonial dynamism. The book explores the moral underpinnings of modern Indian urbanity, far from sentimental escape. It echoes de Beauvoir's call to become rather than be born into gendered fates by examining how memory's chokehold, love's ambivalent precipice, and societal optics demand resilient recalibration rather than resignation.

Thus, the novel, *The One You Cannot Have* is proof of the liberating power of romance fiction in contemporary Indian literature—a genre that, under Shenoy's direction, transforms from escapist fantasy to a sharp social razor. It invites readers to a more sympathetic urban ethos by humanizing the upheavals of urban existence and the subdued rebellions of gendered selfhood: one in which unfulfilled desires, rather than ghostly burdens, drive us toward mutually beneficial thriving. Like Aman climbing his cavernous well, Shenoy's work invites us to grasp the rope of vulnerability and ascend toward bright, untangled tomorrows. In an era of rapid change, Shenoy's work serves as a reminder that the most authentic stories of love are those that are etched not in isolation but rather in the shared, imperfect weave of our collective unraveling.

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