

# From Sevitude to Selfhood : Female Agency and Class Resistance in Preeti Shenoy's *A Place Called Home*

John Suganya. M PSGCAS

## Abstract

The impact of social hierarchies continues in societies in post-independent India, especially for women from marginalized classes. Subaltern women such as domestic workers remain trapped by poverty, gender bias and rigid social norms even in the present times. Deprived of economic power and social recognition, they experience systemic marginalization in both private and public spheres. Preeti Shenoy's *A Place Called Home* (2022) captures this enduring struggle through the life of Alka, a young woman and the daughter of a maid. The novel portrays how class-based discrimination, gender inequality, and the denial of personal space shape her identity and self-worth. The title itself becomes a potent symbol not merely of shelter, but of belonging, dignity and freedom all of which are denied to women like Alka. Domestic workers are often expected to be available around the clock and are treated as invisible. Through the homeless, vulnerable and subservient existence of Alka and her mother in the novel, Shenoy reflects the lived realities of marginalised women. This study highlights how Alka's journey to find a home for herself, reveals the silent strength and resilience of marginalized women who strive to reclaim their space and redefine their worth in a society that continues to exclude them.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial marginalization, Subaltern women, Domestic workers, Class discrimination, Gender inequality, Identity, Home as symbol.

In Indian culture, social hierarchies rooted in caste, class and gender continue to shape the lives and prospects of millions, especially women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Even with legal and constitutional changes, the upper classes and dominant castes still hold significant power, while individuals from lower socioeconomic levels including domestic workers and labourers encounter systemic exclusion. These hierarchies function not only in public institutions but also within private households, where class disparities result in unequal relationships. Women situated at the lower end of this hierarchy endure a dual oppression due to both their gender and social standing. They are frequently deprived of education, agency and respect and are expected to serve others quietly.

Contemporary Indian literature frequently functions as a mirror, reflecting society's socio-cultural divisions and the plight of marginalized communities. Preeti Shenoy, a prominent figure in contemporary Indian English literature is noted for her emotionally charged stories and depictions of women navigating challenging personal and social realities. While she began her literary career with themes of love and personal growth, her later works, such as *A Place Called Home* (2022), show a more in-depth engagement with issues such as gender inequality, class oppression and marginalization. Shenoy's writing offers voice to women from many backgrounds, particularly those on the margins of society, emphasizing their struggles, tenacity and silent forms of resistance.

The *A Place Called Home* (HOME) is set in Delhi, a city with stark contrasts between the lives of the rich elite and the marginalized working class. The plot revolves around Alka, who grows up in an elite people's house where her mother was a house maid. She lives in a windowless, small, 10 x 8 servant room in their home where she is emotionally and socially alienated due to her socio-economic status. She studies ardently to escape from this place and to own a home for herself. Her journey of life depicts

the complexity of Indian society, where class, gender and power combine to shape identities and chances.

The novel explores the layered oppression faced by subaltern women through intersecting structures of class, gender and social exclusion, while simultaneously giving voice to their acts of resistance and their ongoing search for identity and belonging, particularly through the life and choices of Alka. This paper analyses the experiences of Alka and her mother in the novel employing the concepts of Subaltern, Marginalization and Female Agency.

The Subaltern Studies emerged as a response to the neglect of marginalized voices in mainstream history and literature, especially in postcolonial context. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* argues that the subaltern individuals belonging to the lowest social ranks are systematically silenced and denied the power to represent themselves. In *A Place Called Home*, Preeti Shenoy echoes this concern by depicting the invisible lives of domestic workers, like Alka's mother Seema, who exist within the spaces of affluence but are never allowed full personhood. They serve, they endure, but they are rarely seen as individuals with stories, struggles or rights. Their pain remains unspoken and their labor is taken for granted. Alka's life, shaped by her mother's social position, becomes a powerful representation of how subaltern voices are suppressed across generations.

Alka's mother, despite her strength and resilience, is a pure victim of structural oppression. She has no agency over her own time, no control over her personal choices and no access to opportunities for upward mobility. Her identity is tied entirely to her role as a servant, which limits her ability to advocate for herself or her daughter. Shenoy uses this character to highlight how gender and class intersect in domestic spaces, creating a reality where poor women are not just economically exploited but socially erased. When Seema brings chai to Mrs. Shetty she sees little girl Alka pressing Mrs. Shetty's feet. Alka hopes that Aayi would tell her that she had a lot of home work to do but she says nothing. She is totally a victim, a Subaltern who never speaks and always follows the orders. Her existence is defined by servitude, silence and sacrifice, where she is constantly expected to be available and obedient yet invisible. Despite her long years of service, she is not treated with respect or dignity even in her death.

What hurt most was that her mother's body was kept in that very room till Alka arrived ....not have been pleasant for you to have dead househelp in your living room.....tucked away in the servant room....(Home 81)

Her life is dictated entirely by the needs and moods of her employers and she is granted only one day of leave each month, Alka asks " Why do you get only one Sunday off, Aayi?" (Home 16). These underscore the systemic disregard for the basic human rights of working class women. The Shetty household symbolizes the elitist attitudes that sustain inequality. They maintain a rigid social boundary between themselves and their servant, a boundary that is constantly reinforced through tone, behavior and expectations.

Alka's early childhood is marked by a deep and painful awareness of her inferior social status, despite being raised in the physical space of an elite household. As the daughter of a domestic worker in the Ranita Shetty's family, she occupies a liminal position. Mrs. Shetty shouts, "Alka Tanvi's bed is not made and you haven't picked up her uniform from the floor either!..... as soon as you come back from school, understand?" (Home 10). Tanvi, daughter of Mrs. Shetty is two years elder to Alka but her daily chores should be done by Alka when she returns from school. She grows up surrounded by material comforts but she is not able to access any. "I have told you not to touch my desk. Look how you've messed it up!" Tanvi cried angrily. (Home 12). Alka always knows very well how to behave to her owners. She always suppresses her anger as quickly as she feels it because her Aayi has brought her up like that. Once Alka completes the work assigned by Mrs. Shetty she has yet another routine work that

is to press the feet of Mrs. Shetty. “A little harder, a little more pressure”, Mrs. Shetty commanded ....feet on the stool...Alka on the floor...”(Home 12). This slavish existence becomes the root of Alka’s emotional and psychological distress. She is subtly but firmly reminded of her place through Mrs. Shetty’s tone, the body language of the family and the unspoken rules that govern her existence in their home. Over time, these repeated signals of exclusion instill in her a sense of shame, confusion and identity crisis.

Alka’s childhood experiences of class-based discrimination are not overtly violent yet they leave deep emotional scars. She is made to feel perpetually indebted to the Shettys for their so-called generosity in allowing her to live in their home and attend school where Shetty’s daughter also studying, though this arrangement is merely a byproduct of her mother’s labor. This toxic form of charity disguises exploitation as kindness. At the age of ten, during a harsh winter, Alka asks Mrs. Shetty for a room heater. Mrs. Shetty responds by questioning whether she has paid her school fees, insinuating that the cost is borne by her. Alka only later comes to know the reality that her school gives free education for underprivileged children. Mrs. Shetty further warns Alka not to be too greedy. Through Alka’s, Shenoy reveals how class-based marginalization seeps into a child’s consciousness, shaping her self-worth and worldview. She poignantly captures how Alka as a sensitive child, attuned to subtle cues, internalizes exclusion and begins to believe she is undeserving. By placing Alka in this conflicted position, Shenoy underscores that marginalization does not always manifest through visible violence or material deprivation it often exists in the emotional alienation of those who live on the fringes of privilege without ever being permitted to truly enter it.

Alka’s experiences in school and college further reinforce her social exclusion and class-based marginalization, despite her academic capabilities. She performs well in her studies and remains focused, yet she is always seen as different someone who doesn’t fit in. Her inferiority in educational spaces adds another layer to Alka’s struggle with identity. Her classmates come from affluent, urban families and carry the confidence of privilege but Alka, with her background as the daughter of a domestic worker, is constantly aware of what she lacks. She always spends her time in library or in loneliness. Once when she attends a party of her classmate Harish, Tanvi, and her elite friends mock her:

She lives in the same building as me because her mother is our maid. Look at her, all dolled up in my old clothes.....Oye, who did you come here with? The friend asked, her tone immediately changing .....(Home 42)

Shenoy captures the silent loneliness of a girl who has the talent and the will to succeed but is weighed down by societal perceptions and internalized inferiority. Alka’s inability to form close relationships or express herself freely reflects the emotional cost of being the other in spaces dominated by the privileged. The education she is given only adds to her humiliation and the pain of being treated as a ‘charity project’.

Alka’s adulthood marks a decisive transformation from silent endurance to active defiance and the assertion of female agency. She moves to Bangalore to pursue her MBA. She experiences an air of liberty there as she conceals her background. Yet her social isolation persists; her only friend, Manasi, inquires about her family background. During this period, Alka meets Krish, her senior and quietly falls in love, only to discover that he and Manasi are in a relationship. The sudden death of her mother leaves her in profound loneliness. At this vulnerable moment, Krish’s mother proposes that Alka marry her elder son, Subbu, the owner of a 400 acre estate. After prolonged contemplation, Alka accepts.

Marriage soon exposes Subbu as an embodiment of patriarchal dominance. He withholds all business matters from her, declaring such affairs to be “a man’s work”. She is relegated to the kitchen, his

mother's care and household duties. The news of her pregnancy fills him with joy at the prospect of a male heir. However the birth of a daughter dims his enthusiasm. He presses Alka for another child and reacts with visible disappointment when their second child is also a girl. Thereafter he retreats into emotional distance.

During her mother-in-law's first death anniversary gathering, a relative linked to Mrs. Shetty recognizes Alka and begins to inquire about her. Mrs. Shetty subsequently discloses the long hidden truth to Subbu. Enraged, he strikes Alka, prompting her to smash a lamp in retaliation. He brands her as a leech, daughter of a househelp and a criminal and expels her without hearing her explanation.

When the life she has built as a wife, mother and an estate mistress is threatened, Alka is forced to confront and acknowledge her origin and identity as a daughter of a domestic worker. With this confrontation comes the courage to speak for herself. Alka marches to Mrs. Shetty's house to demand what gave her the audacity to intrude into her life. Returning to the estate, she finds Subbu yearning for her presence. Her education, emotional maturity and capacity to navigate complex situations now stand as her greatest strengths. Recognizing that time and distance can heal, she resists the confines of her marginalization and steps out of the metaphorical darkness. She no longer hides or apologizes for her roots. She rather seeks to right the wrongs, reconcile with her identity and make peace with her present. She refuses to be defined by shame and reclaims her identity and family through personal agency.

The symbolism of the title *A Place Called Home* evolves as Alka's journey unfolds. For her, "Home" comes to mean emotional security, independence and belonging, things she must create for herself rather than inherit. Shenoy's portrayal of female agency is subtle, showing that empowerment often emerges not from dramatic rebellion, but from small acts of courage and the refusal to accept passive suffering. Through Alka's transformation from a marginalized girl to a woman with her own voice, Shenoy offers a powerful commentary on resilience and the slow, steady work of reclaiming one's life. Alka's homecoming is not just to a place but to selfhood.

Shenoy's narrative also exposes the intersectionality of gender, caste and class oppression. Alka's hardships stem not only from being a woman but also from her working-class background. Her life has been shaped by her mother's position as a domestic worker. Even while living in proximity to privilege, she remains excluded and judged, often by other women like Mrs. Shetty, Tanvi, and Manasi. Despite their own patriarchal constraints they enjoy freedom that Alka lacks. These upper-class women are not overt villains but their complicity in sustaining class divisions underscores how patriarchy impacts women differently depending on their social position.

The novel concludes with quiet but profound progress. Alka does not escape into luxury or achieve a perfect resolution. Instead she claims her dignity through self-reliance and by confronting personal challenges, particularly in her relationship with Subbu. Shenoy avoids romanticizing her journey. She emphasizes that for marginalized women, empowerment often lies in everyday acts of survival and self-care. Ultimately, *A Place Called Home* becomes a story of reclaiming space, self, and identity. It urges readers to acknowledge that real social change begins when all women regardless of class or caste can claim a home in every sense of the word.

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*A Place Called Home* is abbreviated as HOME

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