

From Choices To Consequences: A Critique Of Rational Choices And Symbolic Interactions In Shenoy's *Life Is What You Make It*

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Abstract: *This study explores rational choices and symbolic interactions in the text of the novel Life is What You Make it (2011) written by Preeti Shenoy and how it effects the protagonist's life course. The study is qualitative and it employs Close Reading as the technique. Using Adam Smith's (1776) Rational Choice Theory and Symbolic Interactionism postulated by Herbert Blumer (1969). The study analyzes how rationality plays an important role in Ankita's life while making choices and how her choices are based on the meanings she associates with different symbols and her interactions based on these symbols. It also comments on the relationship between choices and their consequences.*

Keywords: Rationality, Symbols, Interactions, Society, Choices, Self-interest, Adam Smith, Preeti Shenoy, Herbert Blumer, Mead, Meaning.

Introduction

Choices serve as the foundation for decisions. These are daily activities that occasionally go unnoticed, yet they have a big influence on how life unfolds and create the future. Every decision, whether good or poor, has repercussions. Every decision has an impact on the future, and certain decisions determine one's fate. While some decisions result in the anticipated outcomes, others have unpleasant and startling repercussions. Decisions can impact a person's life for a long time. However, some people use their willpower and drive to control the undesirable conditions. Everybody makes decisions, but they all first examine the potential benefits of their choices. In a similar vein, a decision that seems logical to one person may appear absurd to another. As a result, our decisions are determined by our particular understanding and preferences.

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) explores the roles of rationality behind human decision making. In his seminal work *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith (1723-1790), explains the role of rational thinking behind human decision making. Smith states that people are logical beings with self-interest as the primary concern and they measure the outcomes of their choices and decisions in terms of their own benefit and usefulness.

American Philosophers and sociologists George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and Max Weber (1864–1920) proposed the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism, which suggest that shared symbols, like language, are what constitute a society. The term "Symbolic Interactionism" was coined by Herbert Blumer in 1969. He developed a theory and later, some testing procedures to evaluate Mead's theories, who remained his teacher and mentor.

Preeti Shenoy is a prominent Indian author, novelist and celebrity. *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), *A Hundred Little Flames* (2017) and *Wake Up, Life Is Calling* (2019) are some of her well-known works.

The novel *Life is What You Make it* (2011) is the story of Ankita Sharma, a young and energetic middle class girl from Kerala, South India. She is a brilliant student, an amateur painter, debater and athlete throughout her school life. She decides categorically about her education, career and love life. She loves her school friend Vaibhav but when she gets admission in St. Agnes Women College, she meets another boy named Abhishek, who starts loving her at first sight. She has to leave her hometown for continuing education in one of the most prestigious management schools in Mumbai. Abhishek, takes it to heart and commits suicide notwithstanding the pain of betrayal. She associates this suicide to her actions. She feels traumatized due to this shocking news and gradually undergoes severe psychological disorders, but with her will power and determination and family support, she fights back and decides to live once again. The story is about her adversity, hardships and struggle.

Review of Relevant Literature

According to Dubey (2014), *Life is What You Make It* is based on the life of Ankita Sharma, a young girl who suffers a lot and subsequently develops a serious mental illness. It describes her mental struggles, suicidal thoughts, hospital stay and the pain she undergoes. Besides being a tale of chaos and many ups and downs, the novel also examines the importance of hope, courage and determination that are crucial for survival.

Yadav and Tiwari (2022) in their study shed light on the connection between issues of mental health and its relationship with family and other relations. “The novel offers a nuanced portrayal of the interplay between personal relationships and mental health. The novel explores deep into the complexities of how our interactions with others can deeply impact our psychological well-being and vice versa” (p.02).

Vaddakel (2016) analyses the philosophical aspects of the novel, *Life is what you make it*, from point of view of Existential Humanism by stating that the novel has a strong appeal to all age groups due to its compelling narrative.

Dr. Niranjani and Maghishavarthini (2020) explores the significance of hope, in the tough journey that Ankita had to undergo with her mental trauma and disorder. They observe that Life has numerous turns that can either make a person's life beautiful or otherwise. Psychologists propose several strategies, including grit, self-efficacy, optimism, inspiration, determination, but the most crucial tool for approaching issues and challenges with a mindset and a plan to get the desired outcome is hope.

Prema, Arputhamalr and Rengarajan (2021) observe that the novel is a good example of Psychological Realism which does in fact provide a thorough account of the protagonist's fight in life, contains elements of psychological realism. Moreover, it presents the protagonist's journey with a special emphasis on her feelings, ideas, and emotions, mostly during this tough journey.

Problem Statement

Individuals try to make calculated and reasonable choices in life, but sometimes the outcomes are unexpected, undesirable and even catastrophic. Humans create and assign their individual meanings to different symbols based on their social interactions. Ankita Sharma, the protagonist of novel *Life is What you make it*, makes choices about her life and she faces the catastrophic consequences. Further, Ankita Sharma bases her choices on her own interpretation of symbols through her interactions with the society.

Research Question

How does Ankita Sharma's choices and its consequences affect her life in the novel *Life is What You make it*?

Theoretical Frameworks

1. Rational Choice Theory

In his influential piece of work "*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*" (1776), political economist and philosopher Adam Smith argues that individuals are rational and self-interested while making choices and they base their decisions on a reasoned judgment of how useful or useless they are in terms of outcomes. It states that People are rational decision-makers and determine which choice is the best. They form their decision-making processes in self-interest. They make choices that will have the most useful consequences in their own lives. Adam Smith called this larger interest "the invisible hand" but it might well have referred to all other social, economic or cultural factors.

2. Theory of Symbolic Interactionism

Nickerson (2023) states that Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework associated with American Philosophers and sociologists George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and Max Weber (1864–1920). Nickerson further holds that Blumer (1969) identified four primary elements for social interaction. Objects have subjective meanings for individuals and they act in reference to that meaning. Furthermore, Objects, people, and events are defined and characterized according to the subjective interpretations of the individuals involved. Likewise, for individuals, meanings originate from interactions with other individuals and at a broader level, with society. Subsequently, an individual's meanings are produced and reconstructed through an interpretive process that takes place each time that person engages with others (Nickerson, 2023).

Research Method

The research is qualitative and it uses qualitative methods to analyze the aforementioned aspects in the novel as this method is effective for a comprehensive understanding of the selected aspects of the novel. The study makes use of Close Reading technique as a research method for the analysis of the text of the novel.

Analysis

The novel is set in the 1980s in Kerala, Southern India. The story starts in the present first and then the writer takes us to Ankita Sharma's earlier life. She is going through a health issue. She has a confident personality, her integrity and strength of character and her superior nature. All this shows her rationality in her choice making and the symbolic interaction at play behind what she thinks and do. Ankita is quite clear regarding her choices and decisions. She is still young but her rationality is evident from the very start of the novel. She describes all the details about her life, family and her student life with clarity. She appreciates what is good about something or somebody and she disapproves of what she thinks is not proper or suitable. Becker (1976) maintains that according to RCT, individuals not only chooses and act rationally, in most of the circumstances, primarily in self-interest; they also justify their actions by associating it with the results or the outcomes they have achieved or the alternatives which were available to them. This thinking consequently give them a feeling of self-validation, approval and pride.

When she enters the hospital for her checkup she at once decides that the place is not for her nor does she belong there. She exhibits a sound and balanced judgment and she is a confident and composed person also and her interactions are deeply steeped in the meanings she has been acquiring throughout her childhood and early adult life from her surroundings she is living in. she is going through a health issue and severe mental ordeal at the end of the novel, but still she thinks herself to be a lot better than so many people. So while starting her introduction where she is taken to the mental hospital, after she

faces severe mental issues, she disapproves of her being termed as somebody with a psychological problem. She wants to tell the other patients who are there for treatment, that she is not like them. She has a feeling of superiority and excellence. She thinks she is not an ordinary, girl next door, she is a “somebody”. She has been holding academic excellence and other co-curricular awards throughout her academic career. Blumer (1969) argues that S.I postulates meaning as something which comes from a distinct source. It does not believe that meaning comes from the inherent characteristics of the thing that possesses meaning or that meaning develops as a result of the combination of psychological components in an individual

Ankita has a friend, a boy named Vaibhav. He studies in an engineering college. As meeting and socializing with boys are not allowed in her family, he sometimes calls her from a public phone. Though her family does not like it but secretly Ankita likes it. Blumer (1969) while discussing symbolic interactionism claims that human behavior is determined by the meanings people assign to things, occasions, and acts. These meanings are socially formed through interactions. Meanings are not innate but they are formed by the social context in which they take place and may change as individuals engage with their surroundings.

Ankita associates the meaning of being liked by someone to her being the best and most important. Ankita realistically and rationally portrays what she feels happening around her, in her immediate family or her personal life. She also recognizes the fact that being with boys or hanging out with them, is considered improper behaviour for girls, particularly middle class and she accepts this normative standard silently. Damasio (1994) states that “*Human beings are not purely rational or purely emotional; they are a complex blend of both.*” (p.9). It means an individual’s choice making is a complex process where these two work together, in a synergy, and in every choice no matter how rational it is, at least a most minimum amount of emotion would be there and vice-versa.

Many a time, Ankita finds herself in situations where she has to make a choice intentionally and choose between options. Such an occasion is significant and crucial for her because her decision making is steeped in both rationality and emotion. She meets another boy named Abhishek, and starts loving him. She even meets him at his house. She has made a choice and she stands by it. Even if she talks to Vaibhav, she does not tell him anything about her new relationship with Abhishek. On the other hand, deep down she still feels the guilt and the weight of her betrayal. She does not even wait for Vaibhav calls or his letters anymore which she did in past. She also knows she should not tell Vaibhav about this as her Symbolic Interaction stop her from doing so as this symbol means betrayal and disloyalty. On the other hand, when thinking emotionally, she knows this act of her means infidelity and betrayal in the social and cultural context.

In the same manner, this reliance on rationality and the way it affects Ankita’s choice making and decision making is evident and recurrent in the story. Her philosophy of choice making is based on the notion that choice making is a serious business; individual and subjective and should be dealt so. The Youth Festival, an event in which many colleges participate, becomes a turning point in her life. It is in the same festival late night party that Abhishek and Ankita kisses for the first time and they both are infatuated with each other. That night in the party, there is a mix crowd and almost every other boy and girl was dancing, singing and drinking. She feels misfit over there. She cannot relate herself to this kind of environment. So she decides to stay outside, where she once again sees Abhishek, they come closer and closer. Later, the Police raids the party. Some of her classmates are taken by the police and the incident becomes a hot news the next day, tarnishing the image of her friends and her and their institution. Ankita, deep down in her mind, is contented and satisfied with her in-time decision, not to stay inside the dance room. She had a choice to stay and not to stay inside, but she chooses not to stay inside as the environment of the dance floor was bothering her. Her rationality forces her to leave the dance floor though her symbolic interaction may have forced her to stay as she could not leave her friends who were busy dancing and ethically, she should have stayed. She chooses not to. The reason

is simple-she does not like it.

While discussing RCT, Bezar et al (2021) comments about rationality behind human decisions and how they affect human choice making. In the novel it can be observed that Ankita's actions are shaped by her rationality and symbolic interactions, which imply that some people exercise rationality in their decision-making because, for some, the concept of rationality itself is significant, while for others, the outcomes that are culturally and conventionally accepted are important.

The most powerful and vivid manifestation of rationality and rational choice making behind Ankita's decisions and her behaviour is reflected in the part of the story when she faces the dilemma of continuing her higher studies, for her MBA degree. To her delight she gets accepted by four management universities, including her own hometown University of Cochin CUSAT. Ankita is very much excited when she comes to know that she has also made for one of the most renowned and prestigious business management institutes in Bombay. It is every young man's dream to be a part of this institution in Bombay. She is very excited and she breaks the news to Abhishek but he turns off at this news at once. He wants her to continue her education in CUSAT, with him. Abhishek tries to persuade her to stay back but she says he is being unreasonable for thinking that she would stay back. Abhishek denies this and says he would love to study where the both of them are there. They will be together he suggests, rather pleads. But Ankita knows no stopping. She thinks he is just a fool, an emotional fool who is forcing her to leave her ambition and the journey she wants to embark on.

Aksan et al (2009) while commenting on Symbolic Interactionism holds that symbols serve as a tool for thought and communication and help to develop the intellect. Mead (1934) concentrated on how individuals construct order and meaning through symbolic interaction in their daily lives. Ankita's Symbolic interactionism has shaped her thinking and the meaning she associates with this action means disloyalty and betrayal, she thinks. She is pressed under the burden of guilt too but that is exactly where her rationality comes in. She rationalizes this action of hers in a much practical and pragmatic manner and she just lets it go.

Ankita decides to embark on the journey of her life all alone, leaving back all relations of love and affection. She does not care whether Abhishek loves her or not. She has become selfish and her rational faculty of mind has become dominant over her emotional one. To her, Abhishek whom once she loved so much, is an emotional fool. She may be blinded by her selfishness and her pride, which seems the case from the outlook. She sees this situation as an opportunity and she wants to grab it, choose rationally without caring for the sentiments of others. At the same time, her rationality makes her feel that she is being rational, practical and pragmatic. she tries to justify it by stating that Abhishek though that she was hard hearted whereas she was just being practical.

when Ankita and Abhishek are meeting for the last time, Ankita is reluctant whether to tell him that she may not be able to continue with him, as she dreams beyond the small town of Cochin. Her dreams are too big and high. On the other hand, Abhishek wants her to stay in her home town where they both can study in the university of Cochin, together. Ankita simply is not convinced no matter how harder Abhishek presses. She is there-she wants to pursue her dreams and that is only possible if she continues studying in Bombay, gets a degree from that well known management institute and end up getting a high professional career. For her, love, liking and attachment all are meaningless and unworthy. She is focused, energetic and passionate about what she dreams of.

Abhishek pleads her to be present by her side but she is least moved by it. She does love her and she admits it to herself too but when it comes to leaving her dreams for her love, she would simply not sway. She will leave everything to pursue her dreams, let alone Abhishek. Here is exactly where her rational thinking and symbolic interaction comes into action and pushes her to make choices according to the circumstances and according to her personal like and dislike. She says she cannot promise. Pursuing her dreams is her world and how possibly can she leave her world for something or even

someone she loves. She cannot even tell him that she loves him because she does not want him to keep hoping for some future prospects, and lest Abhishek could persuade her one day or emotionally convince her to abandon her dreams and high hopes. She does not even want to tap on that idea.

Zimbardo (2007) discusses the change in human behavior according to situations and as a result of different external or internal factors. He explains how human beings make choices to do something or to fall on the good side or the bad side and how individuals are capable enough of suppressing their inner voice, the conscious when they are up to go wrong somewhere. He states: *“Our nature can be changed, whether toward the good or the bad side of human nature. The incrementalist view implies an acquisition of qualities through experience or concentrated practice, or by means of an external intervention, such as being offered a special opportunity. In short, we can learn to become good or evil regardless of our genetic inheritance, personality, or family legacy.”* (p. 07).

The news of Abhishek’s suicide arrives few days later, like a thousand volts’ shock to her. She simply cannot believe her ears. Its all over in newspapers. She feels guilty for not behaving with him properly. He has taken this cold blooded behavoiur of Ankita to his heart and commits suicide, by drinking heavily and the drowning himself in the sea and his body is recovered from the beach at Fort Kochi. Ankita does not attend the funeral as she cannot stand the shock and bereavement. Suvi her friend pushes her to go but she says she will not be able to see Abhishek’s dead body. She is still drawing upon her rationality and reasoning. She is still wondering why on earth did Abhishek commit such a stupid mistake of killing himself. She probably knows the answer. Her conscious is replying as to whom is to be blamed for his such an extreme action. But her rationality comes in again and she mutes the voice of her conscious, not that she cannot face it, or she does not want to listen to it, and deep down she still loves Abhishek, but for the sole reason that this feeling of guilt will become a hindrance in her future life and she will not be able to hush it ever. Her conscious starts blaming her after the news.

According to S.I, what is considered proper and right according to the accepted norms of the society should be accepted so. The voice of the conscious, which is usually right and impartial, is hushed by Ankita. Time and again it tells her that behind Abhishek’s suicide is her betrayal or her too much reliance on rationality and self-interest. But Ankita pays no heed initially. She ignores it and tries to silence it. She does not want to face it. It was the reality at the moment. Abhishek’s such extreme action is consequential. The heart warns her again and again, but she chooses to listen to the head. She mutes this blame. In the same context,

Becker (1981) argues about rationality in human choice making in all circumstances. He comments that humans rarely lose their ability to function rationally when making decisions and advancing their own well-being, even in trying circumstances. To maximize their own interests, they will attempt to get over any obstacles that stand in the way of achieving their desired outcomes. Ankita moves so swiftly towards achieving her goals like good academic career and a bright future in Bombay, that she may do anything or leave anyone to reach there. She does not settle for anything inferior or lesser. She chooses to ignore it as rationality would say that his death has got nothing to do with her. Kahneman (2011) explains in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) how in human thinking and choice making process, two systems often work simultaneously. One is emotional and intuitive and the other one rational and deliberate. Kahneman calls them System 1 and System 2 respectively. He suggests that *“System 1 operates automatically and quickly with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control while system 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations.”* (p.20).

Ankita moves to Bombay, along her parents as her father is posted there too. She is admitted to the renowned management institute and she is proud of it. She is energetic and passionate about her studies. she makes new friends. Her life is in full swing. She has started to paint. She gradually develops a habit of reading extensively and running and jogging untiringly. She is also surprised to see her boosted level

of energy even after busy days at her institute. she notices she still wants to run and paint and read. She feels overly-energized some times. One night, as a festival in the institute was in progress, she participates in a speech competition and she does exceedingly well after which she offers her friends, Chaya, Udday and Joseph to dance with her. She starts behaving strangely by climbing high places and trying as if she is jumping or falling. This shocks her friends who pleaded her to come down. She is herself surprised rather shocked to notice her mood swings.

Zimbardo (2007) discusses the change in human behavior according to situations and as a result of different external or internal factors. He explains how human beings make choices to do something or to fall on the good side or the bad side and how individuals are capable enough of suppressing their inner voice, the conscious when they are up to go wrong somewhere

Ganti (2024) suggests that according to RCT, people employ reasoned calculations to make decisions and accomplish goals that are in line with their own. These findings are also linked to the maximization of an individual's self-interest through the use of RCT, which is anticipated to produce results that offer people the most advantages and fulfillment in light of the restricted options at their disposal. She also notices her memory getting sharper. She could recall things and write them down as it in original. She could even predict things related to her academic progress like tests and exams. She feels very high and charged sometimes. Stranger even, she becomes very low at times and that too suddenly. She notices this sudden change herself but she cannot name it categorically. She keeps up late nights and she is super fresh the next morning.

Suddenly, one day she recalls Abhishek, after a long time. She feels the pain of his death right in her heart and holds herself responsible for it somehow. She writes about her past life extensively and she adorns her friendship with Abhishek. She starts writing poetry and stories and read extensively all sorts of books. She becomes sleepless and loses weight. Her journey towards her mental disease has begun and soon she would arrive at the most drastic point of her life when she tries to take her life.

It is days after when her parents come to know about the love letter written by Abhishek in his blood. They are infuriated by this act of her and they scold her for being so immodest and bold as to love a boy without their permission. They burn those letters and she is on fire at this act. They need an explanation yet. She is like being caught red-handed, somewhat late though, but her parents make it a point to deal this matter sternly. They would not at all allow, such an indecent and untoward act of shame and infamy by letting her love a boy secretly and he being so bold to write a love letter in his blood. But she does not lose the string of her rationality. She is emotionally pressurized by her parents with an intent to stop her. She does not pay heed, but when it comes to the reason for Abhishek's suicide, she tries to come out clean by not accepting any blame or anything to do with the incident. She still thinks she is not responsible for all what happened to him. She did not tell him she loved him even though he told her the same a thousand times. But even when faced with such an intense situation at home she does not lose of rationality by recognizing the fact that there are times when emotion and feeling come out winners.

Blumer (1969) states that according to S.I, an individual's choices are shaped by social interactions carried out in the environment for which individuals rely on the use of symbols and each symbol has distinct meaning for everyone. It is this interaction based on these symbols which creates meaning; the meanings of good and bad, right and wrong and proper and improper. It also empowers one to act according to the situation.

Ankita's toughest part of life starts when she feels panicked and worried for no obvious reasons. She is terrified. She sees unknown things and hear unknown voices coming from nowhere. She is afraid, an unknown fear is always there. She cannot sleep and she feels darkness everywhere. This alarms her parents and she is taken to a psychiatrist. She herself admits she has stepped over so many things [being rational] just to see this maniac episode. She feels frustrated, starts forgetting things. She feels so

miserable that she wants to take her life and tries several times. She is taken to Bangalore, to a mental hospital where a renowned psychiatrist Dr. Madhusadan treats her. Her treatment is a long journey and she struggles a lot. Even when Ankita is in the hospital, she never let's go of her rationality.

Finally, Ankita makes it out of the mental hospital. it is indeed a triumph. It is an arduous and demanding journey, a pitfall which seems endless at first but Ankita with her courage, determination and hope and above all her power of rationality and being realistic and practical in such critical times. It was also through the help and personal care of her treating physician Dr. Madhusadan at the National Institute of Mental Health, and the support of her friends and family that she comes back to normal life. It is through this realization, which comes late though, but it does make Ankita a changed and transformed person who now, would value love and relations and place rationality and emotions at their right and required places. She is humbled by this dark episode in her life and she culminates her story in these words:

“Sometimes, we do not appreciate fully what we have unless we lose it...I thought I was the greatest when I managed to get into the MBA course. I prided myself on my smartness and my intellectual ability. Perhaps in my arrogance, I had considered myself superior to many others who had not made it— who knows! I had presumed that having a corporate career is the ultimate thing in life. To go up the ladder, reach a high position and be financially independent...” (P.150)

Conclusion

Through the close examination of Ankita's choices and decisions about her life, the focus of this study was to analyse choices and their consequences, exploring the relationship between choices and consequences and ultimately revealing the consequences of rational choices. The text highlights at several places, how Ankita makes choices, relying on the rational faculty of her mind, and the consequences which follow in the form of incidents, which change the entire course of her life afterwards.

The text is replete with instances where it is obvious that Ankita faces many situations in her life where she had choices available; she could have chosen between options, both rationally or emotionally. As this is clear after reading the text that at times thinking and deciding rationally benefits Ankita Sharma when it comes to studying hard, choosing the right course for study in school and college, taking admission in a renowned women college like St. Agnes and participating in co-curricular activities and speech competitions' etc. Any normal, sane and stable person would do the same as she did. It is her life and she knows it better. She decides wisely and practically.

Similarly, Ankita has been a clear-minded person and although still young, she is mature and sensible enough to see things in her own perspective. She arrives at a turning point where she has to decide between staying back at Kerala, her hometown with Abhishek, her first true love or leave and continue education in one of the most prestigious management schools in Mumbai for her MBA. She chooses the latter, decides to leave Abhishek, who takes it to heart and commits suicide notwithstanding the pain of betrayal. Ankita loses him forever. She undergoes severe psychological disorder which triggers suicidal tendencies in her which gradually develops into a fatal mental illness

Another important aspect of the novel is how Ankita's rational decisions turn out to be a source of trouble and disturbance. She chooses wisely and practically, yet when it comes to choose between continuing her education at Kerala, her hometown and Bombay, she opts for the latter. Probably staying back at her hometown, she could have stayed with the person she has loved, Abhishek. He pleads her to stay, and not to go. Even her own heart tries to convince her to stay back but she altogether rejects the idea and Abhishek's requests by terming him as an emotional fool. Soon, what follows makes her life a roller-coaster ride and she faces the consequences for the major part of her life.

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