



Research Article

REDEFINING WOMANHOOD IN SHOBHA DE'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Shobha De is one of India's top best-selling authors with fourteen novels to her credit. She is among the first to explore the world of urban woman in India. Her novels voice against the patriarchal culture which considers woman as an appendage or an auxiliary to man. She strives to undo this tilted and distorted image of woman who cries for freedom and equality which still goes unheard in the patriarchal world. Her novels are populated with women who are more powerful than men, striving for self-actualization and are essentially represented as sexually liberated, challenging the traditional set up of the society. This paper focuses on the portrayal of liberated women redefining womanhood in Shobha De's two novels – *Socialite Evenings* and *Second Thoughts* which offer a slice of urban life exposing the hollowness of Indian marriage system. Shobha De as a fervent feminist voice supports equality between genders and protests against the exploitation, marginalisation and commoditization of women.

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INTRODUCTION

Shobha De is one of those Indian English writers who occupy a distinctive place as a journalist as well as novelist in the literary world of India. Her popularity as a novelist rests with her ability to portray sensitive aspects of human life, social and sexual relationship and women's psychology with a touch of open-heartedness. She shows this as a part of training and influence of the western culture on Indian culture, traditions and family relations. In most of her novels, De personifies the dilemma that has dogged many Indian women writers. She is always one of those modern day women authors who are now expressing themselves freely and boldly creating a new image of the woman. De endeavours to present the new woman who is daring, ambitious and aspiring and is obsessed with realizing her dreams and forcing them upon the male dominated world with a view to obtaining a due recognition of her identity. De's approach towards woman's sufferings and aspirations are akin to the views of Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist critic, who focused on the conflict in the female psyche regarding her role and position in the contemporary society:

The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being. Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means particularly subordination to man; for masculine

prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid economic and social functions. (Beauvoir 30)¹.

Her works have raised the status of new woman who disobeys the age-old practice of submissiveness. She talks about sex, men and eroticism in no uncertain terms. Her women characters exploit their physical potential more daringly and confronts their male counterparts in every field of activity where the latter had been enjoying unquestioned supremacy and domination through centuries.

The way women have been portrayed in others women writers works when compared with Shobha De's works reveals that Shobha De strives to expose the misunderstanding of women about their freedom and mocks at the women's way of asserting their individuality by posing to be men without concentrating on female empowerment as a whole. Most of her novels have been criticised by both men and women for showing female sexuality outside marriage openly, yet her works never endorse such immorality as new normal. Moreover, she suggests that whenever women, whether circumstantially or ambitiously disregard immorality, they cannot escape disaster and consequent suffering. She shows her contempt and dislike for their unethical and socially unacceptable behaviour of the so called modern women who indulge in free sex, live fashionable life with abnormal behaviour. She addresses the crisis in family and society resulted from free woman with false notions.

This paper aims to explore the themes of family, marriage, patriarchy and quest for identity, struggle for survival and marginality in her novels – *Socialite Evenings* (1989) and *Second Thoughts* (1996) with an objective to trace the

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emergence of 'new woman' and to investigate the factors responsible for the transformation in the psyche of Indian woman to become New woman by redefining her identity and establishing a niche in her life.

Changing Image of Woman in Socialite Evenings

Socialite Evenings is the debut novel of Shobha De published in 1989, gives us the picture of marginalisation of Indian women in the hands of their husbands. *Socialite Evenings* concentrates on Karuna, the protagonist of the novel as a self-confident and potential woman who tries to attain independence in every field of life. As a new woman, she makes sex a strong weapon for acquiring pleasure as well as success.

But Karuna's life starts on a depressive note as she marries at a young age and feels very bored with her husband who loves his mother more than her. She realizes that an Indian woman's life is an exhausted generation of wives with no dreams left, marriage was like a skin allergy, an irritant all right" (*Socialite Evenings* 65)². She does her first modelling for a newspaper and doesn't stop modelling in spite of her conservative father's slap for bringing a bad name to the family. She goes on to win the Ad club award for the ensuing year. She prefers to be a free-lance Ad writer with freedom. She starts making ad films as well as succeeds in becoming a modern Independent woman. This was indeed her dream of achieving professional success. Shobha De has depicted Karuna as a very capable woman who is strong enough to circumvent her lot in life and launch into the kind of lifestyle of modelling which is still not acceptable with orthodox Indian families. Karuna becomes financially self-dependent, craves her own niche in the professional and competitive world of advertising thereby asserting her independence. Karuna tries to show how Indian women are made to tolerate and denied to live as an individual. This is clarified when she speaks: "I am made to feel obliged and in debt. It's awful but even my insistence on working and contributing to the running expenses of the house has become a battleground" (*Socialite Evenings* 69). Karuna plays different roles at different times to quench her emotional and psychic thirst. She is a model, a housewife, a society lady and an actor-writer and a paramour.

Karuna is obsessed with the word "status" so much so that she feels ashamed even of her middle class family. She dominates patriarchy as well as tries to 'search' her 'identity'. "I feel claustrophobic; I need to find myself" (*Socialite Evenings* 55). She marries just to kill her boredom and walks out of it with the same ease.

A woman could walk out of a perfectly secure marriage out of boredom? Karuna the main protagonist, is not a bitch, if anything she is far too sensible and controlled. But she's one who recognises her marriage for what it is – empty. Her husband isn't a wife-beater, a drunkard or a gambler. There isn't any reason to leave him, yet that is what she does. Lack of communication is a valid enough explanation for her. She doesn't justify her decision, point fingers or attribute blame (Shobha De, 1998: 330)³.

The novelist through Karuna's case wants to draw the attention of her readers to the all-pervading malady known as 'lack of communication' between husband and wife or between two near and dear ones. This malady is more prevalent in our cosmopolitan towns and cities. Psychologists too opine that this state of affairs directly responsible for many of the mental

illnesses of the modern man. In the *Janamashami* party thrown by her friend Anjali, Karuna meets Krish Mukherjee, "a hot blooded Bengali rebel from the late 60s, who had flirted with all the right things – poetry, theatre and politics" (*Socialite Evenings* 164) he is also a "pretentious adman, whose wife actively helps him in his extra-marital affairs". Karuna's husband introduces Krish to her as "a great guy" (*Socialite Evenings* 167) and Karuna finds him "a shy, sensitive, mixed up man with whom she instantly fell in love" (168). Krish starts seducing Karuna from his first meeting and this torrid affair goes on for three long years, but her husband fails to recognise their relationship. Karuna doesn't opt for the policy of 'silence is the best policy' (*Socialite Evenings* 180) when her husband scolds her for the adulteress affair with Krish, she retorts "if you hadn't forced him on me, this would never have happened". Further she announces about the emptiness and end of her marriage. Through this episode the novelist suggests that woman needs to be practical in life, she must have control over her passions and desires and must have the civil behaviour.

Shobha De shows even the minor female characters have unlimited capacity to transform themselves. One such character is gorgeous, vivacious Ritu in *Socialite Evenings*, who leaves her second husband for a smuggler Gul and becomes a pimp procuring "virgins for him and his friends" (*Socialite Evenings* 220). She lives a sick and servile life and to get a deliverance from it, makes a "half-hearted suicide attempt" (221) by consuming a handful of pills along with whisky. She has a firm faith in manipulating sex and advises Karuna to enjoy "a boring husband in the home and an exciting lover on the side lines – perfect...can have both" (*Socialite Evenings* 173) and inspires her to take "a couple of hard decisions" (173). She does not understand the difference between "a wife and a mole" (131). De has emphasised the importance of self-introspection as it has the unlimited capacity to transform oneself by depicting Karuna as a modern Indian married woman emerging with her new identity and changing image. Suman Bala in her article "Women in *Socialite Evenings*" presents the sufferings of Shobha De's women in an androgynous world for they don't cherish genuine passions but only plastic passions. All the women cast off the conventional sense of morality, the old, tired and repressive sexual move and reveal in erotic celebration of the body. Shobha De has tried her best to express the inner urges of the Indian women, whether rural or urban, in their best possible way. As a feminist writer, De gives her attention to the woman issues in her novels and gives them a new feminist approach focussing on basic human rights.

Redefining Concept of Femininity in Second Thoughts

Second Thought is a realistic representation of the psyche of the traditional Indian men and women. It embodies the story of Maya, a young middle-class educated Bengali girl, whose passion for Bombay makes her choose Ranjan, a foreign returned Bengali boy, her husband. However, the continuous neglecting behaviour of Ranjan makes her devise a different way to survive in the metropolitan city of Bombay. The submissive Maya ultimately strikes a scathing attack on the hollow Indian marriage system by making a 'friendship with a college-going neighbour Nikhil. Shobha De focuses on the consciousness of a married Indian woman who is wedged and trampled between the nature-culture wheels on the one hand, and pulled apart on one side by the centrifugal acts of Ranjan,

her husband and on another side by the centrifugal acts of Nikhil, her lover. Implicitly the novel focuses on the situation of a neglected wife in Indian traditional family, but in a contemporary society. Progressive thinking may allow us to consider Maya's affair with Nikhil, which may appear to be acceptable. When Ranjan is of no use for her, she left with no other way out. Even the title *Second Thoughts* is also quite evocative as far as the protagonist's affair with Nikhil is concerned. The novel also reveals Shobha De's examination of new prospects in married woman's life to seek fulfilment outside the marriage. It is highly significant that Shobha De's novels deal with Indian woman's challenges, predicament, values and lifestyle. She has independent thoughts with a very independent mind. The writer questions here about the claim that we make to be the proud products of the 21st century, yet deep down, we still cherish and nourish the age-old norms and traditions. In that much familiar pattern, the status of men and women had hardly undergone any change. As individual woman may have progressed but in the situation of marriage, man is still the lord and master and a woman has to abide by his whims and fancies whether she likes it or not. The main character Ranjan has studied abroad lived in Bombay but as far as his wife is concerned, he imposes restrictions on her movements. She is not free to go anywhere in the city. She is not free to live in the house as she would wish to. The S.T.D. facility and phone is locked for her. Shobha De thus captures the middleclass psyche by exposing various facets of Ranjan, his attitude to hold on tight to the purse strings so as to control his woman, his complete control even on the use of air-conditioner and so on.

Rajan provides Maya "nothing more than financial support, a decent house to live in and square meals a day" (*Second Thoughts* 263)⁴. He has no "sex drive" (258) to satisfy his "sex-starved" (257) wife. But Maya wants to be "free, alive, reckless and mad" (*Second Thoughts* 75) she also wishes to see the beach "to get wet in the waves, to laugh [and her] insides to perform a wild dance" (*Second Thoughts* 74) but she rather finds herself "pretty much alone" (*Second Thoughts* 222). Her silent solitary suffering is further aggravated by total lack of communication with her relatives. Shobha De shows the parents of either side of the girl at the time of marriage support patriarchal ideals, which may cause lot of confusion and feeling of instability in girl's mind which may impact of her life in in-law's house. The terse assertion of Mrs. Malik at the time of marriage for instance, "Girls can only be moulded if they stop thinking of their parent's home as their own" (*Second Thoughts* 226) was supported by Maya's other Chitra, who also believes that "A girl has to cut the cord to her family quickly and identify with her in-laws. The sooner she does this, the better" (226). Chitra believes that "Girls who cling on to their own family for too long never succeed in adjusting to their husband's people" (*Second Thoughts* 75). Maya has become a lonely being after her marriage to Rajan. She gives enough reason for her pathetic condition – "I don't have a single friend I can talk to, I miss my parents, my home, my environment, and mainly my freedom" (*Second Thoughts* 192) because she wants to fondle, laugh, talk, sing, walk, see, feel and enjoy her life with someone especially along with her husband. She is unable to understand somebody's comment "married means giving up everything you've known as a carefree young girl. And for what?" (192)

Ultimately Maya does not accept Rajan's 'house' as her 'home' for the lack of his affection, affinity and attachment to his house. She says "The house that was how I always referred to this place, even to myself. I was never had a home. My home. Our home. Always 'the house' – impersonal, distant, cold. Home continued to be Kolkotta. My parental home" (*Second Thoughts* 227). She wants to belong to her husband and his family to rid of her loneliness. But 'nobody' belongs to her whether it is her husband, mother, mother-in-law or any true friend. Surely, soon after her marriage everything changed in Maya's life and she is reduced from a free and fluttering being to "a fulltime domestic servant without pay" *Second Thoughts* (*Second Thoughts* 154) even worse than "a resident cook, or a hired caterer" (133) mainly because the role of "a good wife [who] has to learn to adjust and sacrifice" (124). Even she is permitted to peep through windows because staring at strangers may be dangerous as Rajan says that "these same men you spend hours staring at could be the ones who knock on the door with chloroform to rape and rob housewives like you" (88). Here Shobha De satirises the male ego and patriarchal attitudes of the so called highly educated Indian men who never believe in their spouses and harass them with infidelity and immorality.

Maya's suffering, subjugation, isolation and deprived condition turned her into a confused person unable to take any decision on anything. The lack of belongingness, physical dissatisfaction, emptiness in married life and the impact of Mumbai's monotonous life forces Maya to think of Nikhil, a neighbour's young son as a saviour from her dragging married life. Nikhil takes advantage of her pathetic condition and exploits her. Though Maya enjoys her relationship including sexual one with Nikhil because it eases her loneliness and mental tension, but she remains loyal to her husband. She feels disgusted, shameful and guilty about her friendship with Nikhil since the beginning. It is due to frustration from her husband, her ignorance, her inexperience and boring life, and Nikhil's persistent and forceful persuasion which forces her to face a highly dangerous and disgraceful situation in her life. When she comes to know of Nikhil's engagement, she stands at her door "motionless and unthinking" (*Second Thoughts* 288). She realised the futility of the relationship, much more badly than her "uninspiring life" (*Second Thoughts* 171). She determines upon rebuilding her relationship with her husband Rajan, by her own efforts expressed in the concluding lines of the novel: "The more I stared at the spilled soup, the funnier I found it. I knew I would have to make it again from scratch. So what? I had all the time in the world now" (*Second Thoughts* 316).

Shobha De remarkably has shown through this novel that the happiness in family and life is a priceless possession which comes only from abiding oneself to morals but not from money or materialistic things or illicit relationships. Implicitly she has shown the harmonious marital life is most important aspect of life. The writer is thus in favour of marriage, which is based on mutual understanding, respect and sense of sacrifice between spouses. The novel after portraying realistically the life of a middle class housewife, her infidelity caused by a callous mother-fixated husband, upholds the age-old traditional Indian values that alone can make life a success.

CONCLUSION

Shobha De believes in very straightforward narration of events and absolute open-heartedness. We don't find anything snobby about culture or traditions of India in her narrative, she rather upholds the true values of Indian customs and traditions. However, the orthodox people in India condemn her for her open arguments on sexual matters. Despite of all disparagements, her fiction has got wonderful reaction not only from various European countries but all over the world and most of her novels are being taught in the universities of many Western countries. She has become the symbol of highlighting different perspectives of woman's freedom and liberation in the contemporary world. She conceives the extra-marital affairs of women as the resistance or protest by women to break the traditional and moral values in society, when women are denied of the right to live on par with men. Thus her women are daring and courageous in establishing extra-marital affairs to satisfy their natural urge. They are not hesitant in using sex as calculated strategy to get social and financial benefit.

However, her women move violently for their overgenerous aspirations with all their strength in a male subjugated society. In their efforts to assert themselves, sometimes they turn the patriarchal order upside down. They avenge their perpetrators by challenging the orthodoxy of social taboos, and shape their fortune by living for themselves. They don't believe in suffering submissively, and they leave no stone unturned to reach the crest of joy and accomplishment.

The continuous struggle of her women against slavery, subjugation and exploitation is disquieting and arouses pathos in readers' mind and awakens consciousness in women to redefine one's life to face the challenges of life. Her novels are suffused with feminist ethos redefines the man-woman relationships for harmonious life in contemporary Indian society (Das 98)⁴. Indeed, Shobha De "as a writer is candid beyond our imagination...gifted with extraordinary ability to discuss every sensitive aspect in her works" (KR Srinivasa Iyengar, 1983:85)⁶.

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